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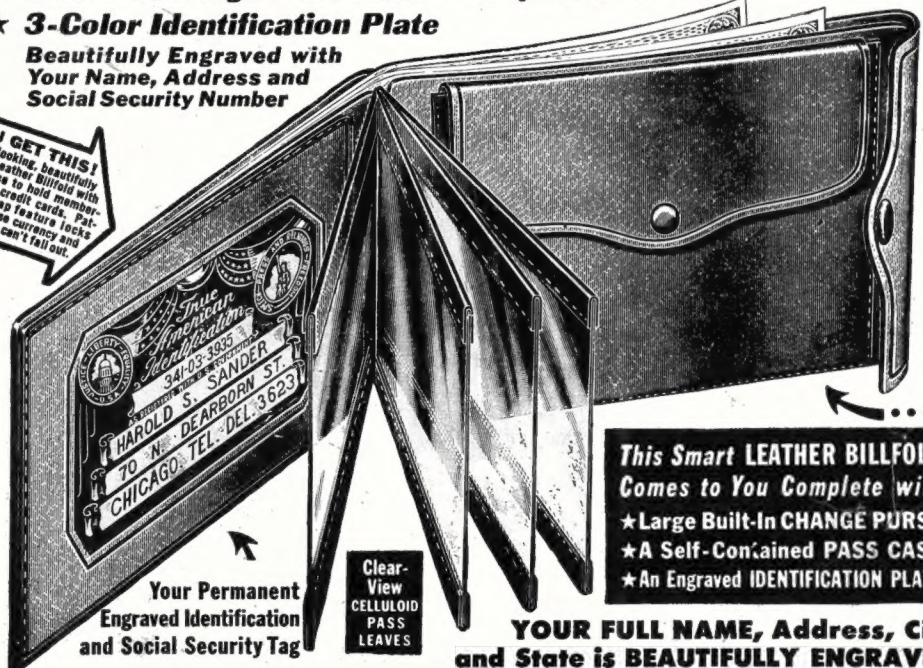
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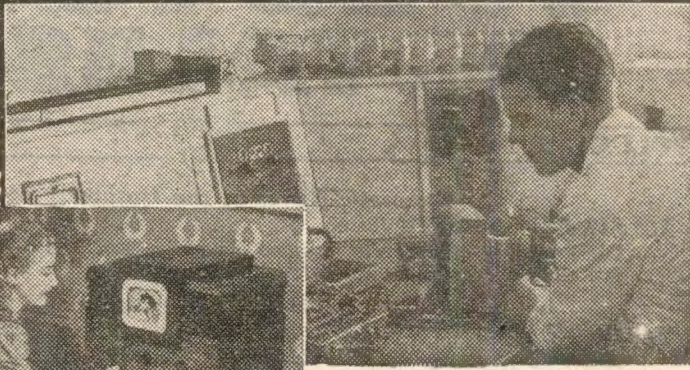
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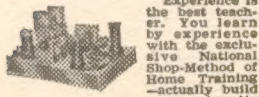


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VOLUME 7, No. 3



JULY, 1945

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SCOURGE OF THE SOUTHWEST

THE earliest mob marauders in America made their presence felt decades before the great gambling and rum wars of recent memory—as long ago as the sixties and seventies of the last century. Not gangs of pasty-faced slum denizens, but redmen, roving the frontiers and terrorizing the border settlements under the leadership of powerful Indian chiefs.

But they were mobs none the less—prowling bands whose only purpose was to plunder, burn and kill. And the shrewdest, most powerful, most feared of these mob leaders was the famous Apache chief, Geronimo.

Geronimo was a native of the country which he terrorized. He was born in Noddo-yohn Canyon, Arizona, in 1829; grew up in the traditions of his race, learned to cultivate land and to hunt, to ride a horse and to use a bow and arrow. When he was seventeen he was admitted to the council of warriors and thereafter was privileged to take part in minor raiding expeditions against hostile Indian tribes, with now and then an adventurous foray below the Rio Grande.

Then, in 1858, while he and the other bucks of his tribe were out reconnoitering, a band of Mexicans attacked the Apache camp at Kas-ki-yeh. When Geronimo returned he found that his mother, his wife and his three children had all been slain. Swearing vengeance, he aroused the neighboring Apache tribes and led them on the warpath into Mexico. When at last they encountered a division of Mexican infantry, Geronimo led the attack and did not rest until the last enemy was dead.

Meanwhile he had met his first whites, two surveyors, friendly men who did not distrust the Apache chief, and were in turn unharmed by him. But not all whites, Geronimo knew, were on such friendly terms with his people. He remembered when, in 1840, the Governor of Sonora had offered an ounce of gold for every Apache scalp brought in; that a band of eighteen white trappers had made some easy money by filling a howitzer with bullets and firing it into the midst of a friendly crowd of Apaches, comprising peaceful men, women and children.

(Continued on page 122)

*"Oh, she's OLD!
Almost thirty!"*



At twenty, thirty seems ancient.

At thirty, forty is distant middle age.

At forty, well, it'll be a long time before you're fifty.

The point is that ten years *ahead* always seems like a long time. Yet, actually it passes "before you know it" . . . and you find yourself face to face with problems, opportunities, needs, that once seemed very far in the future.

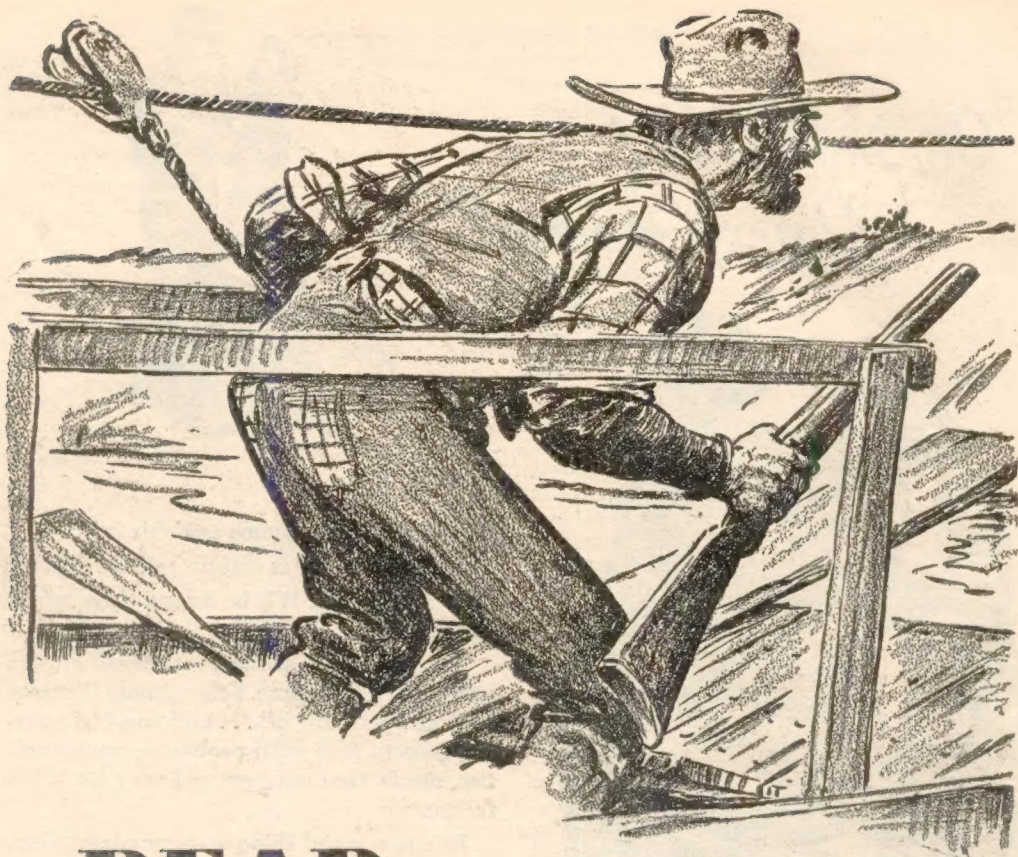
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It won't be long till 1955. Not half as long as you think.



DEAD MAN'S

SADDLE

By
**ART
LAWSON**

CHAPTER ONE

Texas Yankee's Homecoming

JACK HARPER reached the north bank of the Windy River late in the year of 1865. It had taken him a long time to make the trip from Virginia to Texas. He had traveled afoot, by oxcart; he had worked part of his way on river boats. He had started on April Fool's Day and now it was Christmas, or New Year's, or even later, as far as he knew. He had lost track of time somewhere. He had lost track of everything, he reckoned, but the way home. And now he was here and he did not even have to study that any more.

He sat down for a spell on a log near the water's edge while he filled his eyes with the town on the other side. He remembered every

*"Yore tough, Yank, tough enough
to have killed a lot of men in your
day. I'm beginnin' to think—yore
too tough to live any longer!"*



Something snapped in Jack's brain—he rushed across that shallow water like a shot. . . .

bit of it. He remembered how the steeple of the little church had never been completed, because news of war had broken up the prospective "raising," when all the young men went away. He remembered how Stumpy Walters, who tended bar in the Dixie Saloon, had an absolutely round face. He remembered the precise and brilliant cusswords with which old Jim Carson urged the slow ferry across the river.

But he did not have to remember that Kitty Harlan's eyes were an incredible, wonderful blue. He could see that color in the sky again, as he had seen it so often before and during the endless campaigning. He had seen it on the Chambersburg raid, at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg and too many places to remember now—and tonight or tomorrow he would see that color again in her eyes—God willing—as he had seen it so long ago when she kissed him

good-by. That was about the only thing you could be pretty sure five years would not change in a girl—the color of her eyes.

Jack got off the log. Old Jim Carson must be drunk again, he reckoned, since there was no sign of life over there on that ancient scow of a ferry. Jack cupped hands into a megaphone and shouted. He shook the droopy cable. Hell, he thought, it would be good seeing old Jim again. He would really be home when he and Jim Carson tipped up the jug to old times.

But the man who finally appeared was a stranger, a mean-looking little guy who handled the ferry clumsily. He came across the swirling water very slowly. He spat tobacco juice into the stream when the scow ground up on the graveled north bank.

"Where's yore hoss, soldier?" he asked.

Though the scow was on gravel, there were

seven or eight feet of shallow water between its bow and Jack Harper. The ferryman had a long plank at hand but did not offer to shove it out.

"Don't have a horse," Jack said. "He was killed at a dinky little fight called Five Forks—and I ain't been able to steal another since."

"Wa'al—" the man spat again—"in that case, soldier, I reckon I can take you across for ten bucks, Northern. Paid in advance."

Jack started to argue with him: "Just because I got on this uniform—"

The mean little man roared.

"Good Gawd, soldier," he said. "If you was a rebel it'd cost you twenty bucks—gold."

Something snapped in Jack's brain. He was tired of fighting. He had been tired for a long time. He was tired of being called a damn Yankee because the only clothes he could get were the blue uniform of a man he had killed at Five Forks. He was tired of little guys like this whose only interest in life seemed to be to rook or rob an hombre on his way home.

Jack rushed across that shallow water like a shot, kicking spray ahead of him. The man was reaching for a sawed-off shotgun, but Jack smashed it down, and Jack hit the man so hard with his fist he knocked him clear out of the ferry. The man struck the water, floundered there, screamed. He got to his hands and knees, blubbing. There the water was less than a foot deep but the man fought it as if he was drowning.

Jack heaved the shotgun far out into the stream. Then he pushed the scow free from the gravel bank, adjusted the leeboards and ropes to start it across the river. Many a time when he was a kid he had played around on this old ferry, helping run it for old Jim Carson, or taking charge of it when Jim was too drunk. He knew old Jim's cusswords to the last inflection. In those days they had seemed to help the boat along.

But today Jack had no heart to use them. He made the trip in silence—bitter and empty with his homecoming—and he ignored the futile obscenities of the man he had left behind.

JACK rummaged through the shanty on the south bank of the river that had been old Jim's home. It stank of the man Jack had knocked off the ferry. It was filthy in a way that old Jim would never have tolerated. This little weasel must have spent two or three years living here to make it as dirty as it now was. Old Jim, Jack reckoned, had been away a long time, too.

Jack wandered on. At the head of the single street that was Carson's Ferry he stopped a moment, appalled. Most of the entire block of the southern section of the street that he had not been able to see from across the river had been burned down. It had been burned and

left there untouched except for some minor scratchings in the ashes where curious people had hunted for possible treasure or loot. The great cottonwoods were scorched and bare on the south side of the street, but those on the north side hummed in the breeze. There things were more normal. Paint had chipped off here and there. A couple of stores had gone to ruins, as if their fronts had been smashed in. The tiny church looked as if it had not heard a sermon for many a Sunday.

The street had a depressingly lonely look to it. But the Dixie Saloon still stood on its corner. Because its name had not been changed Jack concluded that the weasel down at the ferry was the only Yankee-minded character around here. So Jack opened the door and stepped inside.

A group of men were huddled around one of the tables, not playing cards, but discussing some sort of business over drinks. And, sure enough, there was Stumpy Walters behind the bar with his round face as round as ever and his skin so pale it gave him the look of a man who had lived all his life in a cave. As Jack bellied up to the bar he could see that Stumpy had not changed a single bit.

"Hyah, Stumpy," Jack greeted.

"Evenin', stranger," Stumpy said without a flicker of expression crossing his expansive face. "You can have your choice, mister, of red whiskey or white whiskey. The red's got the strongest taste but the white's got the meanest kick."

"Red," Jack said. "White as a chaser."

He did not hold it against Stumpy that he had failed to recognize him. After all, Jack had been only a lanky kid of eighteen when he went away. Now he was a man of twenty-three. And, it had never occurred to him before that Kitty Harlan had been only fifteen. She was an old maid of twenty now—or was she?

"Harlans still around?" he asked Stumpy when the barkeeper brought the two glasses of whiskey.

"Never heard of 'em, stranger," Stumpy said impassively.

Jack tapped himself on the chest. "Look," he said seriously. "I'm Jack Harper. This uniform—"

"Why—by God!" Stumpy exclaimed. He seemed suddenly to realize something. "Hadn't noticed it. Faded. Say, boys, got a soldier here!"

The men glanced up from the table. Jack tried to explain.

"I took this uniform—"

Stumpy broke in with a muted roar.

"A round of drinks, men, for the hero. Belly up to the bar, boys, and have a snort with a god-damned fine Yankee soldier. Sergeant, ain't it, bud? Drinkin's free for you, today.

All you can hold. First round for everybody's on the house!"

The men rushed up to the bar. They patted Jack on the back. They muttered congratulations. With the exception of one they were all strangers to him. That one was Joe Tweed who had come to town not long before Jack Harper left. He remembered Joe Tweed, because Joe had been a lawyer, a rare thing in that little community. Joe, probably, would not have recognized him even if he had not changed so much in those five years. There were dozens of kids his age around town then.

"Damned good to see you, boy," the men babbled. "Meet Joe Tweed." Joe Tweed was still a good six feet, built like a whip, lean but strong and probably lightning fast with fists, guns or knives. "Meet Cliff Adams—" Cliff was shorter, stocky, and had the eyes of a killer.

It made Jack a little dizzy, and the bitter emptiness that had been with him as he crossed the river filled up with a hard, cold anger.

"Meet Hoke Murphy—"

Jack wanted to take these men and beat out their brains on the battered bar. He wanted to take them all on at once. But the hard anger kept him cool and he lifted the glass of red whiskey—then the white.

Stumpy Walters filled the glasses. Jack emptied them. Joe Tweed had gotten up alongside of him and was talking out of the side of his mouth.

"In long?"

"Five years," Jack said. "And don't ask me how many damned Ya—rebels I killed. I didn't count 'em."

"Hear that," somebody shouted. "This soldier didn't even count the rebels he killed."

"Hell," Jack said, "how many skunks you killed in your day, mister—or rattlesnakes?"

They liked that, but it was a sickness in Jack's throat. Jack got out of there feeling numb and very nearly drunk. He had no money, no horse. But he had acquired some admirers. One of them, Joe Tweed, was with him. Joe had brought two gunmen with him.

"You look like a good man to me," Joe said when they reached the boardwalk. "Maybe we can work together."

Jack calculated his chances. He could smash in Joe Tweed's face for him. He could probably beat one of his guards to the draw, but the second would get him. It was a struggle to put down this wild impulse.

"Yeah?" Jack said.

"You're kind of jumpy," Tweed said. "Noticed it inside. Only natural you should be, killing for five years. But I know a good man when I see one."

He meant a bad man, and Jack knew it. He said, "I heard the words before—but I don't savvy the tune."

Joe Tweed enjoyed that. He said, "We got a sheriff here who ain't much good." Joe Tweed was the sort of man who knew better English than that "ain't"—He used it for effect, so he would not sound pretentious. "He ain't much harm, either," Tweed went on. "He's useful, sort of, but now and then we got a job to do that he can't handle. How'd you like to be his deputy?"

They had noticed Jack's Army belt with the U.S. stamped on the heavy buckle. They had noticed his Colt Army revolver.

"Maybe," Jack said.

"If it's a matter of money—"

"Maybe you and me ought to talk to this sheriff," Jack said. "Maybe he wouldn't want me."

"He'll want you," Joe Tweed said.

So they went down the street together, Joe Tweed and Jack Harper side by side, the two bodyguards trailing. They came to the gray stone courthouse and jail, the only building on the south side of the street that still stood. They found the sheriff in there, old, haggard and gray, sitting in a semi-dark office.

"Got a new deputy for you," Joe Tweed said. "He's afraid you might not want to hire him."

The old sheriff's almost colorless eyes lifted. For a minute he and Jack stared at each other. The sheriff recognized Jack and Jack knew the sheriff. It was old Sheriff Eberhart who had played poker with Jack's pa—who had played poker and tipped the bottle with old Jim Carson and with the pa of Kitty Harlan. Sheriff Eberhart in his old age sneered a little as he recognized the Yankee uniform and the man who was wearing it.

"I'll take him on," Sheriff Eberhart said slowly.

"Then swear him in, damn it," Joe Tweed said. "Things are stirring."

But Jack took a hand. "Just a second, Joe," he said. "I come a long way today. I haven't eaten lately. I don't have a horse. I got to feel my way into this thing."

Joe Tweed was obviously irritated, but he tried to act suave.

"Okay," he said. "Get yourself fixed up. When you're ready—come over to the Dixie."

"Thanks," Jack said.

He went out with them but stopped on the top of the stone steps leading up to the courthouse. The sheriff stood behind him in the darkened doorway. They watched Joe Tweed strutting down the street with his two bodyguards.

"Just what is this chore you can't do?" Jack asked quietly.

"Kill Will Harlan," the sheriff said. "Or bring him in on a cattle rustling charge, so they can hang him."

Jack made a soft humming sound.

JACK had come home. He had fought the war, and now he was here in a town where everything was upside down, with enemies in charge and his old friends all dead or frightened into the opposite camp, or hiding out. On his first day home he had already beaten up a man, pretended to be a Yankee who hated Rebels, and had practically taken a job that would lead him down the gun-trail to Kitty Harlan's pa.

Yeah, Jack had come back and even the dust in the road had changed since he went away. It had become dark from mingling with the charred, burned town. Jack scuffed through it. He crossed the street to the St. Louis Outfitter to get himself an outfit. He bought a pair of Oregon pants. He got a hat with a good wide brim and a red shirt. He bought himself some long-handled underwear, some socks, and the best pair of boots in the place.

All these he charged to the shyster lawyer, Joe Tweed.

He even bought a couple of sacks of the makin's in there and then, with the bundle of new clothing under his arm, he went down the street on his way to the barbershop. He was walking lightly, thinking deeply when he almost ran her down. She had just come out of one of the stores, flanked by a couple of men wearing low-hung holsters, and she halted there on the rickety boardwalk to stare at him. Though she had changed incredibly in the past five years, as a fifteen-year old girl will change while she grows to twenty, he recognized her immediately. He even smiled at her tentatively. He said, "Kitty," very softly, but she did not hear him because she was speaking already.

"So you're the new deputy?" she said scornfully. "And a Yankee soldier!"

It was awful. Her two guards had crowded up beside her, and before he could stop her or explain to her she had run to the hitchrack. She flung herself into the saddle of a big black horse and spurred out of town. Her two guards were close on her tail, covering her completely.

Jack Harper went on to the barbershop. His homecoming was complete now. The girl's scorn was a scorching thing. But it was the blue of her eyes that riled him. That blue was not as he had remembered it from five years ago when he left town to fight the war—when she had kissed him good-by and promised to wait.

CHAPTER TWO

Tail of a Wildcat

JACK took a bath in the barbershop. He lounged in the hot water for a long while, dumping buckets of it on his head, scrubbing himself, trying to get himself clean of a

dirtiness that was somehow inside his skin. He had a shave and haircut with all the fixin's. He took just about everything he could get on Joe Tweed's credit, a credit which seemed to be endless.

But the barber wanted to talk about the war. "You kill many of them rebels?" the barber asked.

"Dozens," Jack said.

But all he could think of was that Yankee soldier he had killed on April Fool's Day, the one from whom he had taken the uniform and the pistol. He had killed that one with his bare hands, with his fists and knees and feet. That was the only one he could remember because it was the last—and for all he knew it might have been the first as well. He remembered it because he had done it with his hands and he had been looking into the man's face as he died. He remembered it because the man's clothes had reminded him of it every step of the way from Five Forks to Texas.

"You kinda get used to this—killing?" the barber suggested.

"Not only that," Jack said, "it's fun."

There was a towel on his face which the barber whipped off quickly.

It was Hell, all of it, pure Hell. In some of those battles you just shot blindly in the general direction of the enemy. In most of them you rode for hours, all night and day in the saddle, never seeing anyone at whom you might take a shot. And when you did your stomach would turn, and you never did remember if you had even hit him.

Only this one that you had killed with your bare hands. He still haunted you, and in an ironical way he was getting even with you. He had already turned your friends against you, your girl against you. He had mixed you up with a bunch of slimy crooks and carpetbaggers and traitors.

If Jack had just slipped up somehow, back there, at Five Forks, he would have died a hero. Kitty Harlan might have heard about it, and she might have made a shrine for him in her heart.

The barber was fanning him now, finishing him off. The barber's face was sober. He had not spoken in some minutes.

"What's gnawing at you," Jack asked.

"The way you said 'fun'," the barber said. He was frightened, as if he had just taken care of a crazy man. Jack laughed in his face.

"The most fun is when you kill them with your bare hands," he said. "Then you know you're doing it."

The barber had turned white as a sheet. He walked away to his back room and Jack pulled himself together. If these fools were going to have at him he would give them more than they reckoned on, he thought. But at the moment he was weak with hunger.

Since the barber did not seem to intend coming back, Jack left his bundled uniform behind and, smelling like springtime in the valley, he went over to the Dixie Saloon. He had barely gotten inside when a man began screaming at him. It was the little hombre of the ferry. He was soaking wet, dripping on the floor, standing spraddle-legged, pointing at Jack. Joe Tweed and his boys formed a semi-circle backing him up.

"That's him," the little man screamed. "The Yankee."

The red Jack had been seeing all day turned to a bright crimson. In two steps he was on the little man. He had him by the seat of his wet pants and the slack of his shirt. He heaved him through the door without bothering to open it. Then he went over and sat down at the table in the corner. He was careful to take the chair in which he had seen Joe Tweed sitting that afternoon.

Joe Tweed came over to the table.

"You're tough, Yank," he said. "Maybe you're too tough."

"I'm tough enough," Jack said.

"That's my chair, Yank," Joe said softly.

They had given him a name. Now they were telling him who was boss.

"There's six more chairs," Jack said, "that all look the same to me. Take your choice." He motioned past Joe Tweed to Stumpy Walters. "I want something to eat, friend, and a bottle of corn."

Joe Tweed was breathing with steady deliberation. Joe Tweed very likely was thinking of the cowboy who had gotten a hold of a wild-cat's tail. He did not dare leave go and he did not dare hang on.

JOE TWEED would lose face if he took any other chair but the one he claimed as his own. But Joe Tweed was a lawyer and he knew just about how much face he could afford to lose if he were to accomplish his designs. He brought over his own bottle and his own boys and he made a joke of the chair.

He made light of it. "You're welcome to anything that's mine, Yank, if you play ball with us. That's all. Like any of the rest of the boys here."

Then he chose a chair that backed up against the front wall to the right of Jack Harper. The man Jack had met in the afternoon under the name of Cliff Adams sat at the left. The rest of the boys gathered around, and some stayed at the bar. They poured drinks, starting with Joe Tweed's bottle.

"Help yourself," Jack waved generously to his full bottle.

"You're lookin' better," Joe Tweed said, "and you smell like a lily farm—" at that instant the swing doors opened and the barber

came in, and even Joe Tweed saw how pale he was and how unsteady on his legs—"Only what in hell did you do to him?"

"Barber," Jack shouted, "have a snort on me."

The barber stared at him for a moment with pale, uncomprehending eyes. Then he suddenly fled again to the street.

"He ain't got a strong stomach," Jack said. "Nor me." He shouted, "Come on with that chuck, bud." He added to Joe Tweed, "Maybe I do smell like a lily farm. The right ingredients will even make a rattler smell purty. But he's still a snake. There was a job you wanted me to do," he finished.

Joe Tweed drummed on the table top with his fingers, beating out a ragged tattoo. The other men sat about silently. It had been a long time since anybody had talked to the boss like this. It made them edgy, nervous. Stumpy Walters brought the food and, in so doing, let up a bit of the tension. Mexican beans and steak, fried until it was black, constituted the main part of the meal. There was corn bread and badly cooked coffee. But there was strength in that food and it fired up the boilers under Jack's anger. Finally Joe Tweed spoke up.

"Maybe I was wrong," he said. "Maybe you're too tough a feller for this job. Now that little guy that runs the ferry. You didn't have to pitch him out like that. He didn't mean any harm. Or the barber—whatever you did to him—or that girl you nearly ran down out there on the walk."

Jack ate rapidly. It was reassuring to know that Joe Tweed had eyes everywhere. Jack had thought his meeting with Kitty had been unobserved. Jack shrugged. He had finished eating. He stood up.

"I noticed there was a church down-street," he said. "Don't seem to be a preacher in it. If you want to get up in the pulpit, Joe, I'll sit in the front pew. But if you expect me to put anything in the plate, you'll have to fix it so the county pays me my first month's salary as deputy. 'Cause I'm broke."

The edgy men grew more nervous than ever. The others had to fight themselves to suppress a roar of laughter. The big boss was making a rough passage with this stranger—and they liked it.

Joe Tweed controlled himself. "Didn't mean to make a lecture," he said. "Might as well get to the point. I'll advance you that salary myself, and you can pay me back when you get it. But there's bigger money than that blowing around in the wind, Yank. There's a thousand dollars reward for the hombre who'll bring in a gent name of Will Harlan on a rustling charge. Cliff Adams, here, is personally putting up another thousand. It's his beef this Harlan is stealing."

Jack said with palms up and open, "Why doesn't the sheriff go and arrest this Harlan hombre, if the charge is legitimate?"

"They're old friends," Joe Tweed said. "Came to this country together. The sheriff just can't do it."

"And," Jack asked, "don't anybody else have a hankering to earn that two thousand bucks?"

"Two-three fellers at different times sort of thought they could use that dinero," Joe Tweed said. "But they never came back to collect it."

"I see," Jack said. He got up. "I'll bring him in. Just tell me where he's at and what he looks like and get me a horse and I'll bring him in."

He had not looked at any one in particular when he said that, but suddenly he found his eyes on Stumpy Walters. Stumpy knew him, and the knowledge of the fact sent a shiver colder than melting ice down Jack's spine.

"This Will Harlan is the father of that girl you nearly butted off the walk," Joe Tweed started giving him more details.

JACK HARPER wanted to see the sheriff before he left Carson's Ferry for the Long Box Ranch, locally known as the Coffin outfit. He wanted to tell the sheriff that he was not a damn Yankee. He wanted to find out what was at the bottom of this business and he hoped to learn other facts about sundry matters. But he never got a chance. Joe Tweed and his boys rode herd on him all evening. Joe even fixed up a place where he could sleep, on the second floor of the Dixie Saloon, with plenty of Tweed's men around to check his movements.

And Joe Tweed was on hand with his two gunmen to side Jack down to the ferry before dawn next morning.

They walked the short distance to the ferry, leading a horse that Joe Tweed had provided with a brand new saddle. The ferryman glowered meanly when they woke him. Some day he would try to put a knife into Jack's back, or he would get another shotgun some place and try to blow Jack's head off. You could read that in his eyes as plain as you could read the reward on a sheriff's wanted poster. Some day, too, he would try to put a knife between Joe Tweed's shoulder blades. This hombre had taken just about too much from life.

Glunly he worked the leeboards and adjusted the tackle of the ferry. The scow swung into the stream, its big pulleys creaking against the jerking cable. Here a clean, pale mist hung over the river, glowing as if lighted from within by some tiny lamp. And the feel of the water had a warmth to it.

But this was soiled and dirtied by Jack's

company and Jack's errand. Joe Tweed and his two boys had come right along with him. The gunmen were pretending to be interested in the ripples created by the scow's movement and the deeper channel swirls of the water. Joe, himself, sidled up to Jack and gave him some final advice.

"That daughter of Harlan's is a terror." Joe pitched his voice low. "Name of Kitty—got it from a wildcat, if you're asking me. She'll shoot to kill and without warning. Her old man's no better. Between you and me—" he dropped his voice to a faint whisper—"I wouldn't try to bring him in alive."

"Thanks," Jack said, "for the suggestion."

It occurred to Jack at this moment that he had a fair chance to shoot it out with Joe Tweed. In the darkness and the mist he could almost surely kill Joe before the two gunnies went into action. It was possible, even, that he could get them, too, and when the scow landed on the north bank of Windy River he could cut the cable and put it out of commission and make his getaway on the fine horse Joe Tweed had given him. Yes, he probably could do it. But Jack had learned in the war that things are not as simple as they seem sometimes. There was that Cliff Adams to consider—others. So he left his hands on the damp rail of the ferry instead of reaching for his gun, and the scow ticked the north shore without incident.

Jack lifted his lean frame into the new saddle that squeaked under his weight. The horse humped his back. He took a couple of quick pitches right there on the ferry boat before he made up his mind that he was not going to throw Jack. He was a good horse, an animal with spirit.

"Might take a few days," Jack said. "I'll have to scout around a bit—get the lay."

"I kinda thought it would," Joe Tweed said. Again he assumed his mysterious, confidential air. "Keep an eye peeled for Sheriff Eberhart. He disappeared last night. It's my hunch he rode up-river and crossed over to tell Will Harlan that we've got a new deputy."

"Thanks, again," Jack said. "Will's daughter already knew it."

"Well—" Tweed said. "Luck!"

He lifted a hand to shake with Jack, but Jack refused to take it.

"I don't shake with hombres who hire me to do their killing for them," he said coldly; then he touched his spurs to the horse and rode him down into the shallow water. For a split second he had seen the same murderous light in Joe Tweed's eyes that had been there last night when he took Joe's chair. But he turned his back to the men on the scow and rode away, his eyes straight ahead. . . .

Jack knew this road better than the men who had pointed it out to him would ever

know it. He had traveled it often enough in those years so long ago. He had ridden his first cowpony over this trail when he was a kid going to school. That was before his pa had been stomped and killed by an infuriated horse. After that Jack traveled even farther out on this trail, going to the Coffin spread where he wrangled horses for Will Harlan, where he often wished he had the nerve to set on a log with Will's fifteen-year-old daughter. He had traveled this road in both directions, drunk and sober, in many moods. But never before had he gone over it hunting a man for head money.

A pale dawn hit the road and pale stars slowly faded into a gray sky. Then a touch of blue streaked the zenith and yellow painted the horizon. In minutes the first welcome rays of the sun were warming his back.

Jack liked to ride with the sun on him, so he went on leisurely, sitting this new saddle that was stiff as an artillery boot and trying to ignore his errand. He let his mind wander back to those never forgotten days when he tried to get up his nerve to do a little courting.

Once he had tried to tell that girl how pretty she was. He had even made up a speech. "You're prettier'n a speckled heifer," he had decided to say, since making it a joke, sort of, wouldn't make it too damn sloppy. But he had not even gotten out with that.

Instead he had told her she sure was a mighty fine shot with that ol' squirrel gun her pappy had brought all the way from Kentucky. She'd be just about perfect if she'd aim a bit more to the right. She had blushed and stirred the dust with her bare toes and he had thought her prettier than ever.

He had even failed that last time when she had said she would be waiting for him. He had managed only to mumble that he would come back. When she had kissed him, then, he had known more terror than any Yankee artillery had ever caused to rise in him since.

And here he was keeping his mumbled promise; keeping it with changes. Here he was forking a horse, wearing an outfit given him by the girl's sworn enemy. Here he was wearing the killer brand—and coming home damned by the ghost of a man he had been forced to kill, while fighting for what he believed to be the right.

Now gloom came to ride with him, like old man Death himself, sharing the saddle. It became a real weight that even the horse must have felt, and that fine beast began to act skittish, running in sudden little spurts, then trotting again, then only walking and snuffing at the gentle, chill breeze. In the old days Injuns or a bear might have caused a horse to act that way. In these days it must have been

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a mare upwind somewheres, Jack imagined.

He was a good twenty miles from Carson Ferry, drawing close to the rolling country where the Coffin headquarters were located. Now and then he passed bunches of longhorn cattle wearing the Long Box iron. They were scary as deer and stampeded in all directions as he approached. But you could read that big brand a hundred yards away.

Then he spotted the mare and the rider. They were on the south side of the river, almost completely shielded from him by the double rows of willow and cottonwood and wild plum thickets. That rider had been pacing him a good part of the way out from town.

Jack reined in. His horse pranced nervously, let out with a long-drawn neigh.

Jack shouted. "Hey, Eberhart! Sheriff!"

He was not sure that it was the sheriff. The rider was mostly obscured behind the thickets of nearly leafless brush. But Jack saw the glint of sunlight on metal. A second later a bullet sang past him so close he felt the breeze of it on his face. He heard its whine—then the sharp bark of the rifle.

Jack acted with the automatic precision that five years of constant warfare had taught him. He tumbled out of the saddle. He flicked the reins over the horse's head so his mount would not wander. He lay spread-eagled and motionless there on the crisp, brown grass.

JACK did not move. He felt a muscle at the back of his neck jumping around as if it was trying to shake a fly. He heard his horse smelling of him, neighing again at the mare, then running towards the river while making peculiar little throat sounds and trying not to trip over the reins.

The enemy had the advantage. Jack had to lie perfectly still, while the person who had tried to kill him could move around. When you are playing a waiting game, even the slightest little movement will relieve aching muscles and help pass the time. But Jack could not move at all, because he knew he was being watched. He knew that if he did not appear absolutely dead he would get a bullet in his head.

There was a good chance he would get it, anyway.

A good half hour passed, maybe longer, before Jack heard movement in the brush across the river at the point where his horse waited eagerly. Then the sound of splashing tinkled up to him as he lay there and he took quick a chance to ease up his arms and legs. It was better now. He was motionless again when the near brush was disturbed.

There was another wait, not so long as the first, maybe, but it seemed much longer, while the would-be assassin hugged the brush on the near side of the river and studied Jack

Harper. By various sounds Jack knew the horses were nuzzling each other. He heard the ring of a spur—a soft, sudden intake of breath, the feel of a hand touching his head.

It was a horrible, crawley feel, the touch of that hand on his head, and it brought with its touch the most terrible of all Jack's memories. It had been much like this back there at Five Forks. Jack's horse had been shot out from under him. He had lost his gun. His dying horse had kicked him in the head, sending him into unconsciousness. Then after a long, black period, he began to hear things, to know of the world again. He felt something touch his head, a hand, touching that place where his horse had kicked him. He wanted to scream with the pain of it.

"Dead as a haddock," a Yankee voice had twanged. "Kicked to death."

"You better shoot him anyway," another voice had answered.

That was when he had killed his man with his bare hands and driven off the other with the gun he had taken from his victim. That was the last battle Jack had fought in that war, because the shooting was over a few weeks later, when General Lee surrendered.

Now there was a hand touching him again and he was not going to wait until somebody suggested a death shot. In that instant Jack went into action. He wheeled around, groping for his assailant, not reaching for the throat as he had done back there in the woods on April Fool's Day but for the hand that held the rifle. He missed that. But he got his arms around his assailant and had a damned good grip on her before he discovered it was a girl.

She could fight, too, that Kitty Harlan who had been described to him as a wildcat. She fought violently, kicking him, trying to spur-cut him, trying to knock him down with the butt of her Winchester. He got the rifle away from her finally, letting it fall to the ground, and when she snatched at his pistol he beat her to it. When he got a hold of her wrists and sat her down so she could not kick she jackknifed on him and bit his knuckles so deeply hot blood spurted. He straightened her up and she was helpless there on the cold grass.

She could talk, though. She could always talk.

"There's only one thing I hate more than a damned Yankee," she said bitterly. "That's a traitor and a Joe Tweed hired killer."

She was so vehement he could smile at her. He did so, amused for the moment by the heat of her fury.

"You always did shoot a little to the left," he said. "You'd better cure yourself of it."

The girl's lips were trembling. Dark lashes closed down over her eyes. It was strange, he thought, how the day had finally come that

he had dreamed about so long, when he would hold her in his arms. As of everything else, fact had made a mockery of the dreams. Though one of his arms was around her slender waist, it was to keep her from fighting, not to caress her. Though he was holding her, it was as he would hold an enemy prisoner.

Then slowly he began to realize that in one respect the dream had been pale and small. This lanky, pretty girl he had known had become a real beauty. Her freckles had faded and her body had filled out and her impudent nose had become something more shapely. You would hardly think of telling her she was pretty as a spotted heifer. But he did, just the same.

"Once," he said softly, "long ago I wanted to tell you how pretty you were. I invented a speech, a funny speech because I thought a serious one would be too sloppy. I was going to say you were prettier than a spotted heifer."

The girl's eyes opened suddenly. Jack Harper looked straight into the angry, amazed blue of them.

"You kissed me when I went away," he said. "Well, I'm back."

He kissed her then, full on the mouth. He felt her move under his grip and knew she was going to bite again. He jerked his head back, laughing.

CHAPTER THREE

Gunsmoke Showdown

JACK was in much the same predicament that Joe Tweed had been in last night. He could not hang onto this girl and he could not let go of her. He needed her, but she was unpredictable and dangerous and he did not know what to do with her.

"I'm sorry," he said. Then he let her go because he could never convince her of anything as long as he held her prisoner. She would just hump her back, fill up with wind and plug her ears. "No, I'm not sorry," he amended. "Damn it, I'm glad I kissed you. For five years I been dreaming of kissing you—but in these dreams your arms were around me, too."

The girl stared at him. She had not moved away from him. Though he had dropped her wrists her shoulder was still against his chest. The fragrance of her hair rose to him, and a faint scent of the wild rose came from her body. He could not bear it so he stood up, brushing himself off with his hands. He did not offer to help her. He took off his gunbelt and dropped it in her lap.

"You've got another gun," she said.

"No, I haven't," he said. "Now—take me to your old man."

The girl did not trust him. She studied him

intently and found no evidence of a hidden pistol. Then she got up out of the grass and squared off before him.

"I don't know what your game is," she said, "but I do know what you're after. Sheriff Eberhart came out and told pa. You became a Yankee during the war and Tweed hired you to kill my father."

"I didn't become a Yankee during the war," he said, "even if Joe Tweed did hire me to do a little murder for him. That uniform was the only clothes I could get. I took it off a dead man who's been haunting me ever since." He was becoming angry with this incredulous girl. "Don't be a little fool. I'm back home. I came back like I promised."

The girl stared at him. "You ride ahead," she said.

Then she picked up her rifle and went for her horse.

She kept that rifle across her knees and the pistol hanging from the horn as she herded Jack Harper up to the Long Box headquarters. The first change in the place that Jack noticed was a tall tower with a square little crow's nest on it. Then, when they were closer, over the crest of a fold in the plains, he saw two blockhouses, built of heavy logs so situated that they covered every approach to the big ranch house. They had made a fort of this place while he was away.

The girl took him past a half dozen gaping cowboys and up to the gallery of the big house. There she ordered him to dismount and climb the steps. She knew that they were expected because day and night there was always a lookout in the tower. He must have reported them half an hour ago. But the front room looked deserted to her so she directed that he should stop when he reached the top of the steps. She followed with the rifle. When she was right behind him she prodded him on.

"Go ahead—easy," she said.

He went on, a scarey feeling in the middle of his chest as if he had stayed under water too long. He kept hands shoulder high. He went on over the threshold that he had crossed only once before in his life because he had never really gotten around to courting this girl who was prodding him with the barrel of a Winchester. Just inside, he halted, aware that the door was flanked by at least two armed men. He did not glance around at them.

He said, "Quit pushing—we've got company."

Somebody was patting his hip, his shoulder, his chest. It was a Long Box cowpuncher, who found nothing lethal on the prisoner except a clasp knife. He took that away. Then Will Harlan took over.

"Set, Jack, over there in that rawhide arm chair," he said.

He was the first person who had not called

Jack a Yankee or a traitor. Jack warmed to him for that, but Jack knew that he had chosen that particular chair because it would make a person almost helpless once he was sunk into its depths. Jack did as he had been told. He kept his hands flat on the arms of the chair, palms up to show that they were empty and that he was not just getting braced for an attack.

He had the feeling of these people gathering around behind him, looming over him like the bank of a river about to collapse on someone moored below. He had identified three men here and the girl, all behind him, standing there, waiting.

"He made me capture him," the girl said.

Nobody else said a thing for a long while. Even Jack could not talk. Words would not come. It was like that time when he had the girl in his arms and did not know how to let go of her. The girl unexpectedly helped him out.

"He claims that he took that Yankee uniform off a dead soldier," she said.

Something surged up in Jack, a great warmth that came from down inside like the warmth of a shot of good whiskey. This warmth grabbed a hold on him and it made him dizzy and it gave him assurance. The girl was trying to believe him. Finally he was getting through their first line of defense.

"It was at a dinky little battle name of Five Forks," he said. "Maybe you never even heard of it. April Fool's Day. I wasn't even supposed to be there." He was breathing shallowly. "When I got East they put me in the cavalry. Then I signed up with Jeb Stuart. I was in Chambersburg, Chancellorsville, the Second Manassas. I don't know how many. Then Jeb was killed and I got mixed up at Five Forks. A cannonball hit my horse and he kicked me in the head before he died. After that I don't remember much of anything but a feller saying to shoot me. He was only a kid. I had to kill him. His uniform fitted me—and his Colt—"

His voice trailed off. There was only silence behind him, that heavy silence of people holding their breaths.

"I been coming home ever since," he said. Then that hot and bitter anger swept him. He hauled himself out of the deep chair and swung to face these people who were giving him the inquisition. The old gray sheriff was there and Will Harlan, whose dark hair had turned white since Jack had last seen him. The cowboy that he did not know was there, too, and the girl. "Damn it!" he shouted, "isn't there any home?"

The faces were blank, puzzled. Then Jack spotted old Jim Carson back in the shadows. Jim was sitting in a wheelchair that he was maneuvering up toward Jack.

"Hyah, son?" old Jim said.

"God damn it, Jim!" Jack said. Old Jim was more of a symbol of home to Jack than any of these other people. He had known old Jim since he was a button. He had run Jim's ferry when the old boy was drunk. "I thought you were dead," Jack said. "Jim, remember how you used to cuss at that ferry boat just like it had ears?"

Then he began to cry.

WILL HARLAN broke out a bottle and glasses. He drew up chairs. Jack took the long bench jutting out from the fireplace because he could not stand being hemmed in by chair arms. He was surprised that Kitty Harlan sat down beside him. She sat just as close to him as she could without touching him and she kept very quiet. They drank a toast.

"To Jack Harper," Will Harlan said. "He's been doin' our fighting for us, by God. Bottoms up."

"Looks like you boys been doing your own fighting," Jack said.

They drank to him, anyway. Then Will Harlan said, "We been doin' plenty, Jack, I can tell you. It was that Cliff Adams who started it."

Jack was surprised at that. He had thought Cliff Adams was only another gunman in Joe Tweed's pay.

"Come down from Kansas somewhere, with a bunch of Jayhawkers," Will explained. "Burned half the town. Raised general hell. Before we knew it he'd got hold of the county government, voting gravestones, fellers who were away and niggers who didn't know what they were voting for. Put a tax on Jim's ferry. Put a tax on every damn cow. Joe Tweed done their lawing for them, the stinking traitor. They got Charle Arp's spread and Gus Baldwin's. They slapped their brands on all the mavericks in the neighborhood, but the tax collector never could find them. We had to make a fort out of this place to keep it. But they got me down on their books as a rustler, claiming I stole my cattle from the county. My own cattle, damn them. They say I rustled my own cattle!"

The old-timer was shouting before he finished. Then he slumped, breathing audibly. He just did not have the youthful vigor to carry his fight to its conclusion.

"They left me in," the sheriff said, "just to make it look legal. They know I can't do nothing alone."

"An' when I wouldn't pay their damn tax," Jim Carson said, "they shot me up. Stuck a ball square in the middle of my spine."

The girl had moved closer to Jack, whether intentionally or not he did not know. But he felt the touch of her arm against his.

"We can't law them out of it," Jack said finally. "But if the courthouse burned down, the tax records and deeds—"

"My God," the sheriff said. "I never thought of that. And I could of burned it down so damned easy—"

"But Joe Tweed would still be left—and Cliff Adams, and the rest of them," Jack said, "and that dirty little round-faced skunk, Stumpy Walters."

"Not Stumpy," Will Harlan said. "Stumpy's okay. He never went over to them. They think he did, but he didn't."

It was like a bright light to Jack. Stumpy, after all, had probably saved his life when he went into the Dixie Saloon the day he got home. Now he knew why Stumpy had never told Joe Tweed who he was. Deliberately that little barkeeper had maneuvered affairs so Jack could join his old outfit. With Stumpy Walters helping, the old-timers might yet be able to swing enough weight to win this home-front war.

"I have an idea," Jack said softly. He was aware that the girl had taken his hand now and was holding tightly to it. "It'll take all of us—even Jim, I reckon, to put it over. I came out here to arrest you, Will. I'm a deputy sheriff. I got to do my duty."

Jack stood up. The girl stood close beside him.

"Oh, no," Will said.

"Oh, yes," Jack said. "Look, it'll work out like this—"

THREE days later Jack showed up at the Dixie Saloon just before dawn. Finding the place locked he banged on the door until a sleepy Stumpy Walters opened up for him. Stumpy was very leery this cold hour of the day. He looked at his visitor fishily.

"I got to see Joe Tweed," Jack said. "I got to see him right away."

The old sheriff was with Jack.

"It's okay, Stumpy," he said.

A little gleam of anticipation cut across Stumpy's round white face. He let Jack in. The sheriff moved back into the shadows and worked down toward the courthouse where he would build the fire that would set them all free. Joe Tweed lived in one of the back rooms on the second floor of the saloon. To get to it you had to pass through another room where his two light-triggered, light-sleeping gunnies bunked. They were up before Stumpy even knocked on the door. They flattened themselves against the walls, guns ready.

"What do you want?" one asked.

"It's me—Stumpy Walters," Stumpy said. "I got that Yankee deputy with me. He wants to see the boss. He says he got Will Harlan."

"Then, damn it, let him in!" Joe Tweed roared.

Joe had been sleeping in his underwear. He was sitting up in the bed when Jack came in, one hand out of sight, undoubtedly holding a six-shooter. Though his hair was mussed up some, he appeared to be absolutely wide awake and alert.

"You bushwhacked him?" he asked.

"I brought him in," Jack said. "He's in jail, right now" Tweed's eyes were shifty. He knew nobody could capture old Will Harlan single-handed. But Jack had his story and he embellished it. "I also brought in an old crippled fool calls himself Carson. He says the town was named after him."

"Yeah?" Joe Tweed said sarcastically. "Now you're going to tell me you brought in that hell-raising wildcat daughter of Harlan's."

"Sure," Jack said. "I got her locked up, too." Joe Tweed got ready to spit on the floor. Jack laughed. "Nothing to it, Joe. I cased that fort they built out there for three days. Every day this old Harlan and his daughter push their friend's wheelchair down to the river so he can take a look at it. They bring two bodyguards. So I just waited in the brush yesterday morning. They wheeled this old bird down there. And I got them all."

For the first time in Joe Tweed's life he could not talk. He swung his legs out of the bed. He did not even bother to hide the fact that he had been holding a pistol on Jack all the time. He laid it on the covers now as he climbed into his pants. He shrugged on a shirt, stamped feet into boots. Only then did he find his voice.

"By God," he said, "I got to see that aggregation." He shouted to one of his gunnies. "Punk—wake up Cliff Adams. By God, Cliff'll drop dead!"

The short, stocky Cliff Adams did not drop dead. He only looked suspicious, as Joe Tweed had looked a few minutes before. For three years they had been trying to catch Will Harlan and this Yankee soldier had done the job in three days. It was too easy.

But with their two gunnies apiece there were six of them against one of Jack, and so far he had behaved very nicely, indeed. So they made a box around their deputy as they walked down the street in the cold dawn, up the stone steps and into the courthouse. Here, on the second floor of this stone building, in the rear was the very substantial jail. There were four cell-blocks to the jail. One, the big one where they kept the drunks overnight, contained the two Long Box cowboys who usually rode guard on Kitty Harlan. The other held Jack's prize prisoners, one apiece.

"There they are," Jack said.

The two boss-men of Carson Ferry stared dumbly at the cells. Their always efficient gunmen arranged themselves around the room, where they would be in the handiest of places.

The girl moved to the back of her cell, which was the signal to start their little game. There she would be safe from flying bullets and, according to the plan, that was paramount.

Then Jack said, "I brought in Sheriff Eberhart, too, gentlemen, and persuaded him to resign in my favor. So I'm the law here now and it's my sad duty to arrest all of you for breaking a county ordinance. It's against the law of this county to carry firearms into the County Courthouse."

"Why—you damn fool," Joe Tweed shouted. "We passed that law. You can't arrest us—"

"Can't I?" Jack said.

Cliff Adams had already reached for a gun. Cliff had been assigned to old Jim Carson since it was one of Cliff's bullets that had crippled him. Jim shot Cliff in the head before that hombre even cleared the sight of his pistol from the holster.

Joe Tweed was reaching for his gun, too. Joe had been assigned to Will Harlan, and Will shot Joe through the chest. Joe spun away, not dying gracefully. Joe's eyes, black and horrible were on the soldier he had hired, the hombre who had out-smarted him and double-crossed him. Joe would not die until he took Jack with him. Upon this tenacity

they had not counted, nor had they believed that he would be able to get off a shot at Jack. But he did manage one bullet before he died and it smashed Jack up against the wall, pinning him there like a duck in a gallery, for the four gunmen to snipe at.

By then that place was a holocaust with the roar of guns, the bitter smell of smoke and blood. But the gunguards were folding up one after the other, dying there where they should long ago have been jailed.

Jack slumped to the floor. He felt as if his whole side had been ripped open. He wanted to just pass out cold there, or die, but he had to keep awake to look once more into those blue eyes that had so often featured his dreams. Nor was he long in waiting. She came running across to him, carrying a pistol that still smoked. She was not the kind to hide out during a battle, though the men had insisted she should. But she was feminine enough to fall on her knees and drop that pistol when she saw how her man was sitting there, clutching at his side with reddening hands.

"Look—look at me," he said.

She looked up, and her eyes were the blue that he had known they would be. Jack Harper was home.



The Beartooth Terror

HE LIVED alone in the wilds of Beartooth Mountain, eating raw beef and elk meat which he shot in defiance of the game laws. He could have had a home with his parents on a ranch near Cody, Wyoming, but preferred to spend his time in the wilderness, trapping, hunting and robbing sheep camps or isolated cabins. That was Earl Durand, aged 26, a frontier Tarzan, whose consistent violations of the law finally landed him in the Cody jail—where he remained behind bars for just one day.

He slugged the jailor and escaped, taking arms and ammunition with him. Reaching his father's ranch that night, with the March snow covering his tracks, the Beartooth Terror

secured supplies, more guns and ammunition, while he held his own parents at gunpoint! Posses had been organized and one group arrived at the Durand ranch, but the young giant shot his way to freedom. His score this first day was two men killed.

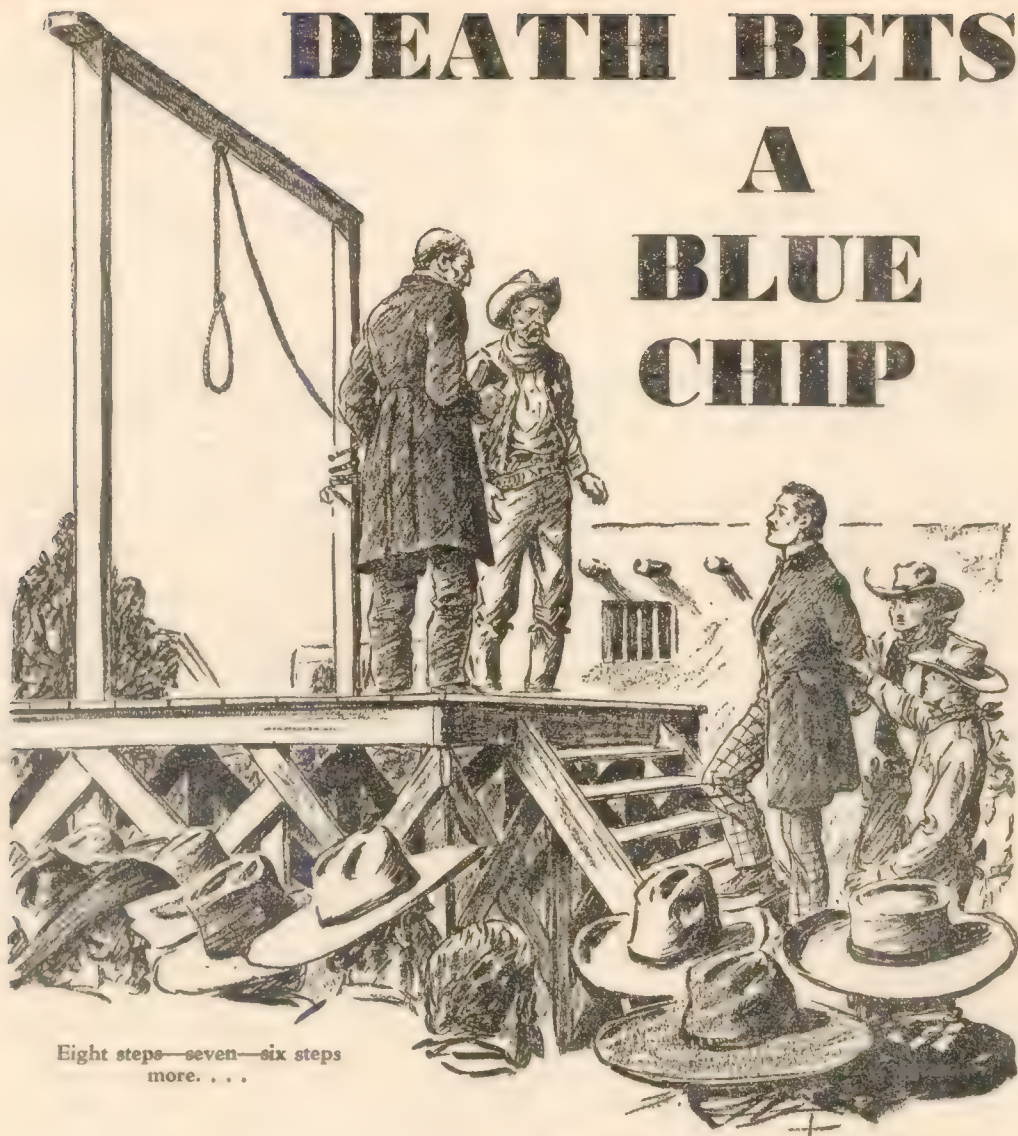
With the hunt growing hotter the giant outlaw secured more ammunition and supplies at scattered ranchhouses and had made his way back to the foot of Beartooth Mountain, two miles south of the Montana-Wyoming line. This had been his home for three years and he knew every foot of it. Taking refuge in a natural fortress hewn out of the side of the mountain, Durand could watch the posses closing in on him. Two reckless members of one party preceeded their companions, and were immediately shot to death by the fortified fugitive.

The battle that followed prevented the recovery of the bodies of the dead men until the following day, when troops with trench mortar and howitzer, sent by the governor, began to blast away at the stone fortress.

But while the big guns were firing at the side of the mountain, Durand had left his hideout, circled the posses and, singlehanded, was holding up the First National Bank at Powell! He netted \$3,000 and killed John Gawthorpe, a teller. Citizens rushed with guns to the bank as the killer was making his escape and, after a sharp battle, managed to wound Durand.

Staggering back into the building, Durand placed his six-shooter behind his ear and pulled the trigger. He measured out his ultimately unprofitable life on the bank's floor.

DEATH BETS A BLUE CHIP



Eight steps—seven—six steps
more. . . .

By **JOSEPH CHADWICK**

"Let's play one hand for old time's sake, Sam—one last hand, to see if you're man enough to raise a tinhorn's ante—with bullets betting a blue chip!"

THE scaffold stood high in the sun, an ugly blotch upon even such a bleak town as Sanchez. The last nail was driven, and the town carpenter had gone his way. The sheriff had tested the trap and secured the rope, the dangling end of which was fashioned into a hangman's noose. The crowd was gathered. It had become still and hushed, while a moment ago it had been restless and talkative. For now the condemned man was being brought from his cell in the adobe jail.

He squinted against the glare of the early morning sun, his step faltering, and the two deputies who flanked him ordered the crowd back. The prisoner, Duke Tuane, walked on through the opening aisle. He was freshly

shaven, neatly dressed in his gambler's attire of black broadcloth and silk shirt, and only his hat was missing. He looked at the crowd, and something seemed to amuse him, for he suddenly smiled over some secret thought. His hands were tied behind him.

Sheriff LeBarr waited upon the high platform, along with the town's parson. A woman in the crowd cried out, a choked sound that was quickly lost. The deputies led Duke Tuane forward. He mounted to the first step, and there hesitated. . . .

THIRTEEN steps! At the edge of town, Sam Donovan reined in his laboring team with a rough hand and a coarse oath. The mурphy wagon, piled high with household furnishings, groaned to a sudden halt. The woman on the seat beside Donovan saw the huge gathering near the squat adobe jail, and now the bewilderment that had been upon her young face changed into a look of alarm. She said, tensely whispering it, "Sam—Sam, why?"

Donovan looked at his wife with bleak eyes, and quickly looked away. He said flatly, "Nan, stay here. Stay here until I get back."

He climbed down from the wagon, not like a man knowing what he is about, but like a person in a daze. He stood a moment by his horses, a big man wearing a troubled frown. A small boy—a tow-headed youngster of four—climbed from under the wagon canvas to the seat. He called out, "Pa, take Pokey," and held out chubby arms.

Donovan said curtly, "Son, stay with your ma," and now he walked forward along the dusty street.

Twelve steps!

Sam Donovan, pushing through the crowd, saw Duke Tuane force himself up. He saw the condemned man look about wildly, now, his amused grin and half-hearted bravado gone. Tuane had a gambler's pale, indoor face, but now it was gray as with the touch of early death. Tuane's dark eyes were those of a trapped animal, darting this way and that, and they seemed to look squarely into Donovan's. A chill worked its quivering way along Sam Donovan's spine, and a clammy sweat broke out on him. The crowd held its breath as they pushed at Tuane. The condemned man's glance held Donovan's eyes, and Donovan thought, *He knows. He knows I belong there in his boots!*

Donovan shrank back, trying to escape from those seemingly accusing eyes. But the press of the crowd held him, and a man growled, "Stop shoving, you!" And Donovan was trapped there by the gallows. Tuane's glance shifted, looked at other faces, as though seeking some person who would save him. But the crowd was silent, sullen, and there was no

sympathy here for a man found guilty of a cold-blooded murder.

Donovan tried to swallow a choking lump in his throat. Despair swept through him, but he told himself, *He doesn't know. . . . He can't know!* Donovan tried to calm the upheaval in his mind. If Duke Tuane knew who killed Ruck Sabin, he would have talked out at the trial. He would have talked to save himself. *You're safe, a voice in Donovan's mind seemed to say. Keep quiet, and you're safe!*

Eleven steps, ten steps!

Tuane had taken two quickly, forced upward by the deputies. The crowd reacted as an individual, sighing heavily in one breath.

Donovan's mind looked back to that night when Ruck Sabin had been killed.

The trouble had started in the Paradise saloon, where Duke Tuane had worked as a gambler. Donovan had dropped in for a drink, for a half hour's leisure in the company of men like himself.

The Paradise was crowded with all sorts of men. The town of Sanchez was swollen with people, people on the move. There was an exodus northward, toward the country beyond the Canadian, for in a week the government was opening the Cherokee Strip to homesteaders. It was an exodus to a promised land, and Sam Donovan was one of those who sought yonder those things men are forever seeking.

Donovan had his wife and young son with him; he had his mурphy wagon, and it held all that he owned in the world. He had quit his job as ranch foreman in the south of the Staked Plains, filled with high hope. He had reached Sanchez, made his camp, left his small family settling down for the night, and he sought a drink.

He elbowed his way to the bar, and he downed his drink. He tarried, liking the excited atmosphere of the saloon. It was six years since he married and settled down, but on occasion his old wildness came to the surface . . . and now he was enjoying himself. He wandered around the big room, smiling at, but refusing the percentage girls who offered their company. He reached the gambling tables, and there was a vacant seat at one. The dealer, Tuane, looked up and said, "Try a hand, friend?"

Donovan knew Duke Tuane, and he also knew one of the players—a hardcase named Ruck Sabin. He knew them well, for the three of them had once traveled together in the old, wild days. It was something of a reunion. But Duke Tuane, in his pale and quiet way, did not mention the past. And Ruck Sabin, big and burly and red-faced, was half drunk and in an ugly mood because of losses over the table. Ruck Sabin looked at Donovan, and he muttered, "How come your wife let you loose

from her apron strings, Sam?" And Donovan knew he no longer had anything in common with these two men. They traveled different trails.

Duke Tuane said, "One hand for old times' sake, Sam?"

Donovan took the vacant seat, somehow knowing he was making a mistake. He could not afford to lose money, and he did lose. He grinned away his loss, but Ruck Sabin was a hard loser. As Duke Tuane dealt, Sabin roared an oath. "Tinhorn," he yelled. "You sneakin' tinhorn! I caught that deal—from the bottom of the deck!" He shoved back his chair and it went over with a crash. He upset the table, spilling chips and cards to the floor, and he grabbed for his six-gun. But Duke Tuane stopped him cold, the six-gun half drawn. Tuane's dark eyes had a frosty look, and he was looking over the barrel of a derringer.

"Hold it, Ruck—hold it," Tuane said.

Rage and whiskey worked in Ruck Sabin's mind, and it was clear to Donovan—and to the whole of the now frightened crowd—that the disgruntled hardcase was likely to go on with his draw, despite Tuane's derringer. Donovan had risen when the table went over, and now he reached out and closed his hand over the wrist of Ruck Sabin's gun hand.

He said, "Ease up, Ruck. You don't want to die here."

Caution came to Sabin's whiskey-and-rage-soaked mind, and he eased up. But he cursed Duke Tuane for a tinhorn, for a crooked dealer, and Tuane's pale face grew stiff and lumpy.

"Ruck, get out of this town," Tuane said quietly, yet for all the crowd to hear. "Get

out before sun-up—or I swear I'll kill you."

Donovan let loose of Sabin, and the hardcase, suddenly silent, swung around and walked from the saloon. The batwings swung shut behind him. Duke Tuane pocketed his derringer, sighed and said, "No more play at this table tonight."

He walked away. Donovan, in sudden need of another drink, went to the bar.

Some time during the night, a gun crashed in a dark alleyway, and Ruck Sabin was dead.

NINE more steps to the gallows! Tuane moved heavily, slowly, like a man already half dead. He was trembling and his knees buckled—he would have fallen had not the deputies caught him. A murmur swept through the wide-eyed crowd. Sam Donovan's heart leapt, and he pushed out his arms as though to stop the fall—as though he, not Duke Tuane, had stumbled. Now, on the gallows steps, Tuane stood panting. He stared upward, at the hangman's noose. The black-frocked parson, Reverend Abby, stepped to the platform's edge and extended a hand. Donovan remembered, all in a flash, what had happened in that dark alleyway.

He had overstayed himself in the Paradise, after the fall-out between Duke Tuane and the half drunk Ruck Sabin, held by the raw excitement of the saloon and of the tough men who filled it. He had gone long without male companionship, and now there was a stirring within him—like a fever in his blood. It was a touch of the old wildness he once had known. He lingered—too long.

At midnight the crowd was more swollen than ever, and there was much talk of the



Cherokee Strip and of the land to be had there. The affair between Duke Tuane and Ruck Sabin was forgotten. . . .

Midnight. Donovan knew his wife would be waiting for him. She would be lying in her bed, spread out by the wagon, but she would be awake and listening for his return. The boy, Pokey—Sam, Junior—would be asleep. So Donovan's thoughts suddenly ran, and the sense of restlessness left him. Stronger things drew him, like metal to a lodestone, and he left the Paradise.

He walked along Trail Street, with its lighted dives, and turned into quiet and dark Union. His camp was beyond the edge of the town, where Union Street became a desert road. He was halfway along the street when Ruck Sabin came from the dark alleyway beside the feed store, and called out, "Donovan, step over here."

Donovan frowned, but he humored the hardcase. Ruck Sabin gave off a mingled odor of whiskey, horses, and campfire smoke. He was drunker than he had been in the Paradise, and the black scowl of rage was still upon his heavy face. He took a grip on Donovan's arm and drew him into the alleyway. They moved far back, to the rear of the feed store.

Donovan said, "What's on your mind, Ruck?"

And Ruck Sabin muttered, "Wait," for a man was coming by.

The man was old and bent, and he was mumbling to himself as he moved awkwardly through the gloom. He had come from behind the feed store and he went on through the alleyway, vanishing into Union Street.

Ruck Sabin said, whispering hoarsely, "Donovan, I'm giving you a chance to come in with me. I'm going after Duke Tuane—the tinhorn!" He paused to curse, almost choking on his rage and hate. "When the Paradise closes tonight, Tuane will be in the office counting the night's take. It'll run into thousands. The hombre who owns the Paradise is up to Dodge City, and Tuane is running the place for him. We'll throw down on him—"

Donovan said, "Not me, Ruck. I want none of that kind of money."

Ruck Sabin stared at him. "You're yella, Donovan?" He swore. "You're yella," he growled, and he began to working himself into a drunken frenzy. "Yella! And a sneak-in' tinhorn like Tuane. Maybe you're in cahoots with him, rookin' honest hombres that sit in for a friendly game. Yeah! That's it. You and Tuane. Well, I'm goin' after the Paradise take—and by damn you're not goin' to stop me!" He lunged at Donovan, raging, "You ain't goin' to tell him!"

Donovan straight-armed him, shoving him back. Jolted, Ruck Sabin bellowed an oath.

He grabbed for his gun. Donovan had no time to think; he saw danger, and he met it. He drew his own six-gun, and he fired. Ruck Sabin cried out and collapsed to the ground. The roar of that single shot still rang in Donovan's ears as he bent over the hardcase. And Ruck Sabin was dead. . . .

EIGHT steps—seven, six steps more! The grim-faced deputies had forced Duke Tuane up three steps, but now he again halted as the heavy quiet was broken by the distant blowing of a locomotive whistle. The daily westbound overland was signaling for the stop at Sanchez. Up on the gallows steps, Tuane turned and looked out across the flatlands. The crowd—including Sam Donovan—also looked. There was a smudge of black smoke, from a funnel stack, in the distance—Donovan saw it, yet did not see it. He was thinking of that night Ruck Sabin had been killed.

He had had no thoughts then, except that Sabin was dead and the world was a better place for his death. He heard shouts from Union Street, the shouts of men seeking the reason for that shot. He turned away from Sabin's body, and he walked through the darkness at the rear of Union Street's crude buildings. It had been a fair fight. Sabin would be found with gun in hand. The law would not ask questions. But Donovan felt unnerved by the time he reached his camp. He wanted to get away from Sanchez. He woke up his wife.

"We'll be leaving," he said.

Nan said, "Yes, Sam." She was a good wife.

They had eased away from Sanchez in the darkness, heading north to the Canadian River and the Cherokee Strip. It was not until a week later that Donovan heard the news of Duke Tuane's arrest for the murder of Ruck Sabin. Murder? The man Donovan talked with explained it. Sabin had been found dead by the rear of the feed store. He had been unarmed when shot down. His six-gun and his cartridge belt were missing. Duke Tuane was blamed because he had threatened Sabin earlier that night. . . . Tuane had no alibi, and when arrested by Sheriff LeBarr he had been wearing a holstered six-gun. Frontier justice was swift and Duke Tuane's trial was held three days after the killing. . . .

Five steps!

Donovan took his eyes off Tuane, for the man's gray face haunted him. Donovan thought, *I could save him!* But by saving Tuane, he would doom himself. No one would believe that it had been anything but murder; neither the crowd nor Sheriff LeBarr would believe that he, Sam Donovan, had killed Ruck Sabin in self defense—for there had been no

gun in Sabin's dead hand! What had become of the hardcase's weapon, Donovan did not know.

Donovan's nerves jerked as an unholy sound of laughter broke out into the heavy quiet. It was a high, cackling laughter.

A man near Donovan said, "It's Loco Jeb."

Donovan saw an old man standing at the bottom of the gallows steps. An old man, and grotesquely bent. Donovan remembered that shape. . . . Old Loco Jeb had passed by the feed store alleyway minutes before the shooting. Loco Jeb laughed his cackling laughter again, and now all eyes were upon him. The old man was pointing up at Duke Tuane, and he was trembling with his madman's laughter.

There was a ripple of motion in the crowd, and Donovan saw that someone—a woman—was working her way through the press of people. He met the woman's eyes—Nan's clear blue eyes. She was pale and frightened, and she knew. From some unfathomable woman's knowledge, she knew. She knew why he, her husband, had returned to Sanchez!

Donovan shouldered men aside, moved to meet his wife. He said, "Nan, you shouldn't have come."

And she whispered, "Sam—oh, Sam!"

Her hands closed hard on his arm.

Four, three, two . . . the last step!

The condemned man had made it. The Reverend Abby touched his arm, spoke to him, but Duke Tuane shook his dark head. He faced Sheriff LeBar, and the lawman needlessly stated that he had been charged by the court to hang Duke Tuane by the neck until dead. "Any last words, Tuane?"

Donovan could see that the man had gotten a grip on himself. The wobble had gone out of his legs, and his face seemed less gray. Tuane said, in a loud and almost ringing voice, "I did not kill Ruck Sabin."

Donovan muttered, "He's game—hell, he's a man!" He felt Nan's fingers bite into the muscles of his forearm, and he looked down at his young wife.

He heard her say, in a hollow whisper, "Sam, you came back, not just to stand here. I know what is in your mind, in your heart." There were tears in her eyes. She removed her hand from his arm. "I will go back to the wagon now." She gazed at him, as though etching his face upon her woman's memory. "Good-by, Sam," she breathed, and turned away.

Up on the gallows, the hangman's noose was being fixed about the neck of Duke Tuane. The thirteen steps were behind him, and now he stood upon the trap that soon would be sprung. Donovan fought a battle within himself, all in the space of a second, and then he called out, "LeBarr—LeBarr, wait!"

His voice was explosive in the dull quiet,

and Sheriff LeBarr stared down at him with a scowl. Donovan shoved his way forward, the eyes of the crowd upon him. He passed Loco Jeb, the crippled and cackling old man standing at the foot of the gallows, and he started up the steps. Duke Tuane peered at him, hope in his eyes, and Donovan called out, "Tuane is right. He not kill Ruck Sabin. I killed him."

An uproar swept the crowd. Men pushed forward, some surging up the gallows steps. Excitement gripped old Loco Jeb, and he drew a six-gun from a sagging belt around his skinny hips. The old man fired two shots into the air, then one of Sheriff LeBarr's deputies worked his way down the steps and grabbed the weapon. The deputy looked at the six-gun, then said sharply, "Jeb, where'd you get this shootin' iron?"

For knife-cut into the cedar grip were the initials "R-S." It was the dead Ruck Sabin's missing gun.

NO HANGING took place in Sanchez that morning. Sheriff LeBarr had been charged to execute Duke Tuane, but he could not hang a man called innocent. Duke Tuane was taken back to the adobe jail, and Sam Donovan was taken with him. The iron-studded door was shut and barred, to hold out the curious crowd. Loco Jeb had been brought in, and under patient questioning he admitted taking the six-gun and cartridge belt off Ruck Sabin's body.

Duke Tuane's face had lost its gray pallor, and he said, "Sheriff, it wasn't murder. Donovan fired in self defense."

LeBarr said, "I believe him, but still I've got to hold him for the court to decide what's to be done."

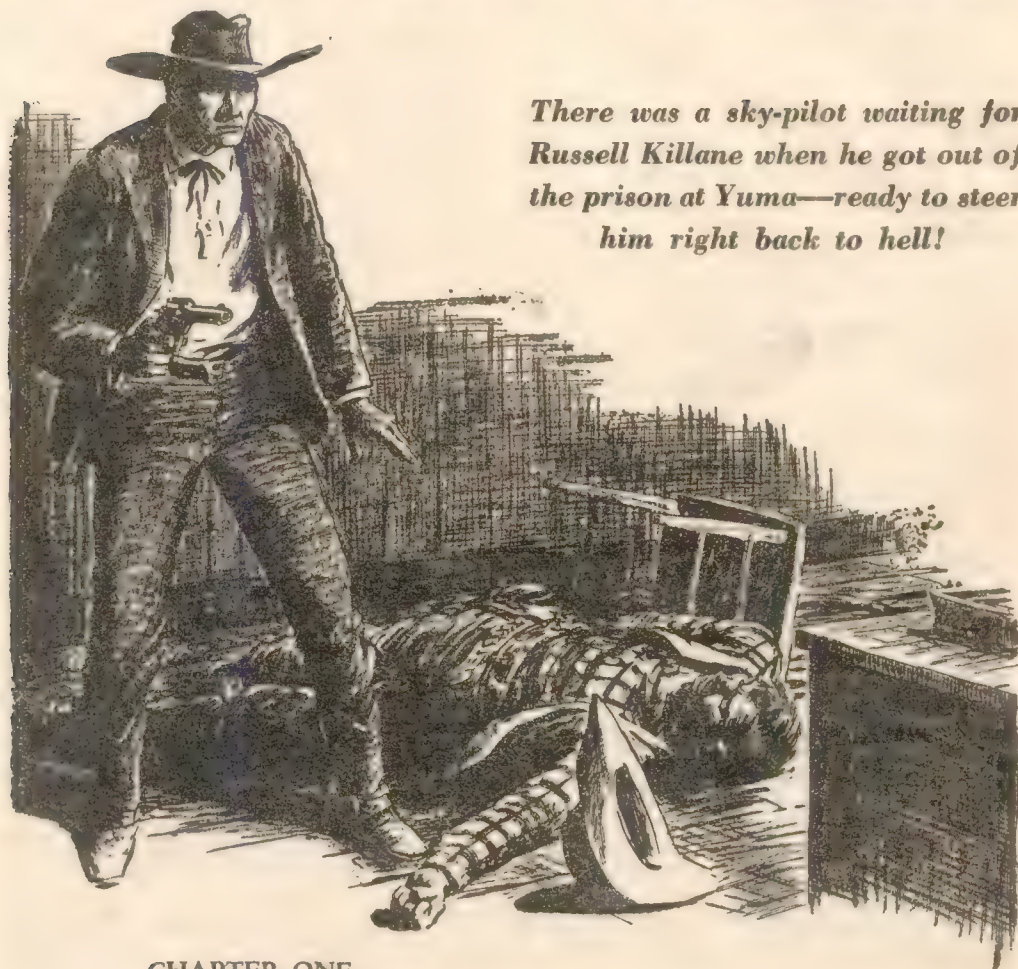
There was a heavy pounding on the door, and a deputy looked out. The deputy said, "Sheriff, it's Latimer, the U. S. Marshal."

Latimer was admitted. He was a big man with a granite face. He said, "Just got in by train, Sheriff. I'm after a hardcase named Ruck Sabin, and I heard he's here at Sanchez. He's wanted for a stage holdup, for robbing the mails. There's a thousand dollar reward for him, dead or alive."

A strange silence lay in the sheriff's office after Latimer finished speaking. Then Duke Tuane laughed, hollowly, and Sheriff LeBarr pointed to Sam Donovan, saying, "Pay the reward to Donovan, Latimer."

Sam Donovan said nothing. He knew that this changed things; there would be no court for him, now. Without a word, he turned and walked from the adobe jail of Sanchez. No one stopped him. On the street, he walked faster and faster until he began to run. He wanted to get back to his wagon, to Nan and the tow-headed boy, Pokey.

SATAN WORE



There was a sky-pilot waiting for Russell Killane when he got out of the prison at Yuma—ready to steer him right back to hell!

CHAPTER ONE

Tutored and Tough

KILLANE got off the train at Junction. Everything he owned was in the canvas bag he carried, and he held that lightly at the end of one long arm. He stood, tall and slightly stooped, on the station platform, watching the train grind out of town, picking up speed for the climb into the foothills of the Maderas. One part of his life was riding away from him on those twin steel rails, but the warden's last words still clung to Killane's mind.

"It's up to you now, Russ. You've got your chance, but what you do with it is up to you."

The hard glare of the sun hurt Killane's eyes, but the hurt was good. And the steady pressure of heat was good, and so was the

clean, unfettered movement of the air. Standing here, he could send his glance past the rim of the town, let it follow the rails across the desert range to where they merged and disappeared in the blue distance. There were no longer any prison walls or iron bars to mar his vision. And that was good.

"Mr. Russell Killane?"

He turned slowly. The man who had come up behind him was short and quite thin, dressed in the dark cloth of the clergy. Killane nodded.

"And you'll be the Reverend Seth Hurley?" he murmured.

The man's smile was his answer. For the moment he offered no further conversation. He surveyed Killane with a steady, careful glance, a man who was balancing the wisdom

SPURS

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

Killane had the gun by the time the man crashed to the floor—across the room Morrant lunged to his feet. . . .



of what he had done in arranging for Killane's parole against what he could see and read in Killane's mouth and eyes.

The man waited.

Killane reached into his pocket, and took out a long envelope. "The warden asked me to give this to you," he said. He watched the preacher tear open the envelope, unfold the letter.

He remembered every word the small man was reading.

My dear Reverend Hurley:

This will introduce Russell Killane. For your further information, I have the follow-

ing to offer concerning this man who has been paroled to you.

Killane was convicted by his own confession of rustling cattle in and around Cochise county, Ariz. He is known to have had, prior to his imprisonment, a more than average skill with guns, and at the time of his capture was running with a tough and ruthless gang of outlaws.

But since he has been in my custody, he has made no trouble. He has done his work well, has by his own effort given himself a good education by studying in our prison library. During his confinement, I have found him thoroughly trustworthy, and it is my belief he deserves this chance for freedom, that he will

serve out his parole to you honestly and reliably.

Respectfully yours,
John T. Maxon,
Warden, Ariz. Territorial Prison.

The preacher looked up from the letter. The Reverend Seth Hurley was severe in the dictates of his creed, and yet in him was a tolerance.

He touched Killane's arm, and they stepped off the station platform, moved up the slope of a low hill beyond the railroad tracks.

Killane walked slowly, with the keen relish of a man enjoying the taste of his first freedom in six years. There was a pleasant flavor to the crunch of rocks beneath his boots, to the scrape of sage brush against his legs. He counted his strides by habit. *Two—three—four.* For six years his cell walls had forced him to turn back at the end of the fourth stride. Now there was a fifth stride, a sixth unobstructed stride straight ahead. Killane smiled.

THE preacher halted at the top of the hill. He turned, pointed back toward the town.

"Junction don't look like much from here," Hurley said.

The town wasn't pretty in the strict sense of the word. Gold and copper and silver had boomed other towns in the Territory, but cattle and the outlying small grain farms of squatters had inspired Junction's slow and careless growth.

The main street was broad and dusty, deep-carved by hoofs and the iron tires of heavy wagons. The buildings were flare-fronted and paintless, gray with desert dust. Yet there was some intangible promise of permanence that Killane could sense as he looked down at the settlement. It would be a good place for a man to tie to, grow up with.

"It's not much to look at," the preacher said again. "But the people in it are human. They have their little pleasures and troubles, their hopes and hates. With the exception of one small tough element, they're all good people. I wouldn't want to do anything that would hurt them."

It was time, Russ Killane felt, for him to speak his piece. He picked each word carefully, so there could be no misunderstanding.

He said, "I don't know what you had in mind when you arranged my parole. I appreciate the chance you gave me, but I'm not going to kid you about myself. I'm not perfect. I rode with a tough crowd for fifteen years, and it's hard to expect six years in prison to get all that out of your system."

The preacher's glance was intent, but a strange smile played around the corners of his mouth. "You think you might get careless with some other man's cows again?"

Killane shook his head. "It's not that. I want to work my way from now on."

Hurley said softly, "That might not be easy."

"That's what I'm trying to get at." Killane's tone was low, steady. "I might run into some of the old crowd again, and that could make trouble. I'm good with a gun—or I used to be—and I'll fight if I'm ever forced to. I want you to know that."

The preacher murmured, "I'd never ask you to run from an honest fight. We've got nothing to argue about on that score, Killane. In fact, I'm not sure but that I've had you paroled into a fight."

Killane looked around sharply. But he could read nothing in the small man's face.

Hurley said, "It might take you all the fight you've got to get our school running here."

Surprise jolted Russ Killane. "But I was an outlaw—"

"No one but me needs to know that." There was a strength and stubbornness of purpose in the preacher's quiet tone. "We've had school teachers here before you, Killane—three of them—but they couldn't make it stick. They weren't tough enough."

"That's why I sent for you. You're tough. You've given yourself the education. You're what we need to get our school open and keep it going. Sure, I know you've been an outlaw. But that's given you something no other teacher has. You know how it is on the wrong side of the law. You'll know more how to deal with some of our youngsters who have wild streaks in them. That's why I'm certain you're the man for this job."

Killane was silent. It was a blow, hearing this job handed him. He didn't want it. He didn't feel capable of handling it. Fighting cow thieves, cleaning out crooked gambling dens—he would have known how to do those things. He had the background, the skill with guns.

But you can't fight kids with fists and guns. You have to use books and judgment, and a strong measure of patience. You have to use understanding and tolerance, a firmness that is coupled with a clear memory of your own youth.

The preacher was saying, "The squatters don't want the school because they think they need their kids more to help with the work. The big ranchers are all for the school, but they want it their way. They think the school ought to be run exclusively for their own children. And there are some toughs under Gus Morratt who want the school killed so they can take over the lease to the property, and build a bigger gambling hall. It won't be an easy job, Killane."

Killane looked grimly at the preacher. "You mean I have to take it, or go back to Yuma?"

"No." Seth Hurley shook his head. "I'm just asking you to take it," he said quietly. "That's all, Killane—just asking."

HE SPENT his first week acquainting himself with the town. There had always been a queer mixture of caution and recklessness in him, of deliberation coupled with an impatient singleness of purpose. He moved toward a job with an eye to searching out those elements which might cause him trouble. Satisfied that he had studied all angles, he struck at his problem with everything he had.

Those first few days he idled along the street, stopping off briefly to introduce himself to the store owners, the blacksmith, saddlemaker, cooper and other junction businessmen. They were a staid lot, satisfied with the future of their town, and quietly willing to do their part.

But they were held in check somewhat by Gus Marrant and the gun toughs who hung out in Marrant's saloon. Killane learned that before he finished his first day in town.

It was up to Charley Jacks, who operated a small whipsaw lumber business, to speak out for the rest of the town.

"You ain't got a chance puttin' the school across," he stated bluntly. He was a short, square man, gray at the temples, and with a hard trap of a mouth. "Don't get me wrong, I'm all for the school. We need it bad if we're going' to grow up with the times. But I'm tellin' you, you ain't got a chance!"

Killane didn't look at the man. He picked up a long shaving from a draw knife, curled it between his strong fingers. "And how do you figure that?" he asked quietly.

"The squatters, for one thing," the lumberman answered. "They got the biggest families, and they're poor as Job's turkey. They figure school is a waste of good time for their kids."

"Maybe I can change that," Killane said quietly.

"Mebbe so," Charley Jacks grunted. "But Anse Duvall and Seth Ackers own the big outfits in this county. They pay taxes and the squatters don't. Can't afford to. Duvall and Ackers won't spend money so a bunch of squatters' kids can have a school."

Killane smiled grimly. "I'll have a talk with Duvall and Ackers."

The lumberman spat at a droning bottle fly. "And there's Gus Marrant. He's the big crack in the axle. He wants the ground the school is on, and he's got ways of gettin' what he wants. He scared out the last three teachers we brought in."

Killane nodded silently at this. He could feel the intent probing of Charley Jacks' stare.

The man went on, "You don't look like a gent to scare easy. You're big, and I've got a

hunch you're tough. But bein' school teacher tough don't cut any ice in Marrant's crowd. They play for keeps, them boys. You take my advice, and stay away from them."

Killane murmured, "Uh-huh." And he said, "What I dropped in for was to see if you'd put up a swing and maybe a teeter-totter in the school yard. I figure the kids would like that."

Charley Jacks grunted, "Well, I'll be damned!" He stared up at the tall man. Then he repeated himself savagely, "Get me straight, Killane. Some of Marrant's crowd have already been spreadin' talk about chasing you out of town. If you go up against them, don't say you weren't warned!"

"I won't," Killane said softly. "And see if you can't get that swing and totter-board rigged up before school starts next week, Charley."

The lumberman stared at Killane's retreating shape. He didn't know which was the biggest fool, himself and his warning, or the new school teacher and his stubborn indifference to the danger he was facing.

Killane turned out of Jacks' office, and into the white sun-glare of the street. It was a hot day, but the breeze down from the mountains was fresh and steady. Deeper in town, men were loafing under board awnings, or unhurriedly drifting between the places of business.

Junction had an appearance of late-summer peace that was deceptive. And dangerous. Each day since he had come to town, Killane had felt a web of trouble tightening around him. He had become the core of the currents of tension that ran through the veins of the town.

The squatters who appeared briefly in town for supplies, had eyed him with a stolid lack of expression. They knew they sooner or later would have to face out an issue with the school teacher, and they were building their defense early. The ranch hands in from Ackers' Fence-rail, and Anse Duvall's big Crowfoot showed Killane the cynical amusement of men who didn't expect this schoolmaster to last any longer than the others before him. And Killane had heard whispers of the thin-veiled threats Gus Marrant's crowd had been spreading against him.

The town and county want the school, but they won't help fight for it. Any trouble that comes up is my baby.

It angered Russ Killane. It brought up the stubborn streak in him, and put a grim edge to his thinking. He stopped off at the school, stood at the open doorway, looking inside. This was his chore, to fill those benches and desks with students who needed book learning. It was his job, and he wouldn't quit until he won his fight, or was licked.

CHAPTER TWO

Send-off to Hell

HE SWUNG away from the school, lengthened his strides towards Gus Morrants big Ace-in-a-Bottle saloon. Inside the winged doors, he halted to scan the broad room with a methodical glance. There was an old familiarity in the odors of spilled whiskey and stale cigar smoke that filled the place. The faces of the men staring at him were strange, yet they were of the same hardcase breed as the gun toughs he had run with six years ago.

One man put down his drink, said with malignant humor, "Danged if it ain't the new tutor!"

Another man got up silently from a table, and hurried down a short, dark hall. This, Killane knew, would bring out Gus Morrants, which was what he wanted. He didn't want this trouble that was being pushed at him. It was not of his making, but he would not run from it.

Morrant came out of the hall, a tall, angular man with dark features, and equally dark eyes that were narrow and coldly shrewd. He surveyed Killane with a faintly insolent glance.

If he had expected Killane to read his threat and turn away, he was mistaken. He saw the slow half smile touch Killane's mouth, and that puzzled him.

Killane said, "I've heard some talk about your men warning me to get out of town, Morrants. That's what brought me here. I don't want any trouble with you. But I came here to open up a school, and I don't want any interference. I don't want anyone to try to stop me, friend."

Temper clouded the gambler's face. "The hell you say!"

Killane's glance was dry and level. "And I don't like gents pointing threats at me. You might spread that around for me, Morrants."

He turned away then, but he knew everything in this room was not finished. He had not expected it to be. He knew Morrants kind, and how such men worked. He had finished his second unhurried stride toward the door, when he heard the rough scrape of chairs on the floor behind him. That would be some of Morrants men coming up. He heard a low, harsh flurry of voices, and danger was suddenly all round him. Still he did not turn back. He moved on toward the winged doors without haste, because he wanted to be closer to that opening when the fight funneled down on him. It was Gus Morrants voice that halted him.

"Don't try to get out of here!"

Killane halted then, and turned, with his shoulders pressing against the batwing doors. Gus Morrants was striding towards him, the

incredulity that had first been in his face changing to a swift red flush of anger. Two of his gun hands were at his flanks and slightly to the rear, gun-ready and alert.

"Don't try to tell me what you like and don't like!" Morrants flared. He thrust out his hand, and that stiff-arm blow caught Killane in the chest.

But Killane had placed himself according to his own choosing, knowing the danger of being trapped inside the saloon. He let the blow jolt him off balance, and he stumbled back through the winged doors.

The gambler accepted that as an act of uncertainty and fear, an attempt to escape. And that was Morrants first mistake. His second mistake was following Killane too closely out into the street.

Morrants voice reached flat and harsh along both lengths of the street. "Don't try to give me any of your fancy book talk!" Now he was talking for the benefit of the town that was watching and listening. He was laying out his lame alibi for what he was about to do.

"I'll run my saloon the way I want, Killane! You thought you could come in my place and march me into a corner like one of your danged school kids. You got another think comin', mister! I'll kick your britches out of town for tryin' to get high-horse with me!"

He bucked the heel of his hand against Killane's chest, but he might as well have hit a 'dobe wall. The man in front of him didn't move.

Killane murmured, so softly that his words were almost without sound. "I don't think you're that tough, friend."

Morrants saw his mistake then. It was in Killane's tight smile, the sheen of cold fury in his eyes. Gus Morrants saw his mistake, and he was startled by it. He tried to step back, but he had no time for that.

Killane said, "I play rough, too!"

He threw his fist in a short, shoulder-driven blow that caught the gambler over the heart. Gray washed into Morrants features, and he went back a step. But there was iron in him, also, and a power that could not be broken by any single blow. He ground out a low, scratchy oath, and reached towards his gun. But he halted that. He was on the street now, and the town was watching. This drove him to a caution he would not have used had he been inside his saloon where death could strike and be covered with a lie or framed evidence.

He had been out-manuevered and he knew it. He had let himself be drawn out into the open where the whole town could see. It angered him, whipping free the leashed violence that was in him. He drove out both fists, saw both blows cut and jolt the school teacher. They were matched in height, but Morrants held the advantage of twenty pounds weight.

He used it, cruelly and viciously, driving out crushing, hurting blows. But he couldn't stop his man.

There was something inexorable in Killane's steady advance, and he was never a certain target. His body kept swaying and shifting, and the shelf of his jaw was tucked down against his chest. He took blows that shocked and hurt, but he kept crowding in. It was the way he fought, with a bleak singleness of purpose, everything in him grooved to this task alone. He fought with his head, and his heart, and his fists.

He centered his attack on Morratt's middle, and pulled down the gambler's guard. He drove his knuckles to Morratt's jaw, then kinked Morratt forward again with a clubbing blow to the stomach. He ended his fight with a smash that landed just ahead of Morratt's ear. The gambler went down like an undercut tree.

Somebody's shout cut through the swift fall of silence. "We'll have no guns, gents!"

Killane lifted his glance, and saw Charley Jacks in front of his office, gripping a heavy-bore rifle. Killane turned, and saw the reason for the lumberman's shout. Two of Morratt's men, Monty Tigie and Tode Ricker, were moving out into the street with their hands on their guns. But the threat of Charley Jacks' heavy rifle halted them.

Killane faced them contemptuously. "What's noldin' you boys back? Don't you like an even fight? There's only one gun against you."

They were killers by every brand of the profession, chill-eyed, hard-mouthed, ruthless. Tode Ricker hitched his bony shoulders impatiently.

He said to the man beside him, "I can get Jacks. You take Killane."

Monty Tigie grunted darkly, "This ain't the time. We are actin' like a couple damn fools. Killane ain't armed, and the town's watchin'. We won't do it now."

Killane cut them with his biting derision. "Your judgment is stronger than your guts."

Tigie said in a venomous whisper, "We ain't through with you yet, teacher—we ain't half through."

"No," Killane said. "You'll wait till you've got my back for a target, with no one watching."

Tode Ricker smiled mirthlessly. "We might at that!" he murmured. "It would be a good way to cut you down, mister. We'll be seeing you, friend—soon!"

Killane turned stiffly away.

THE Reverend Seth Hurley was by nature and training a man of peace and tolerance. It was his belief that there was some good in all outlaws, some bad in even the best of those who professed to walk the straight and narrow. Needless to say, his theory of man and life was not shared by all of his congregation.

Worry and a strong measure of self-blaming regret were in the preacher's eyes as he brought up the rented livery horse. He said, "I wonder now if I wasn't wrong bringing you here. This wasn't really your fight. You'll take the beating in a fight every honest man in the county should be in."

"Maybe," Killane said quietly, "that's how I want it to be."

The preacher made an impatient movement and spoke almost sharply against the thought he knew was in Killane's mind. "You're shouldering this trouble because you can't forget the laws you once broke. You've got the wrong slant, Killane! The six years you spent in prison squared you with your past. You owe no debt to anybody!"

A slow and faintly bitter smile bent Russ Killane's wide mouth. He said carefully, "Parson, that's one thing we don't see alike. Until the law finally caught up with me, I raised a lot of hell. Every scrape I got into hurt someone, either directly or indirectly. I don't know who I hurt, but they were folks like them in this county, ranchers and squatters and townsmen. I'm square with the law, but

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just the same I'd like to do this job for these people around here."

Seth Hurley said gravely, "It might turn out to be a thankless job."

Killane lifted his wide shoulders in a shrug.

The preacher stepped back from the horse. He watched Russ Killane move towards the animal, studied each fleeting expression in the tall man's face. Killane was a man who had got off to a bad start, who had traveled the dark and lawless trails and was now all the stronger because of it.

Killane had known imprisonment, and now he knew the value of freedom. He had learned that a man can amount to nothing without honesty and freedom, the trust of his neighbors, the strong handclasp of a friend.

Killane moved close to the horse, rubbing the animal's muzzle and having his own moment of silent memories. Then he remembered this job he had taken for himself, and it turned him grim. He tested the cinch straps, and swung into the saddle.

Seth Hurley said, "If you follow the road north out of town, then turn east along Bonnet creek you can't miss the squatters' settlement. It's about a two hour easy ride."

Killane nodded.

Worry came back into the preacher's eyes. "You've made a bad enemy in Gus Marrant. He and his men won't rest now until you're either dead or driven out of the country. Riding alone won't be safe for you any more."

Killane said tightly, "I can look out for myself."

"I'm not so sure, boy." The preacher hesitated. He was a man with his own strict creed that was inflexibly governed by the teachings of the Book. He said, "I can't advise you what is right and wrong in a fight like this. The Book says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' But it also says, 'An eye for an eye'—Gus Marrant and his men are killers, and if you want me to borrow a gun for you. . . ."

Killane shook his head. "Thanks, parson. But I won't use a gun until I can't fight with anything else." He picked up the reins, nudged his mount into movement.

AT THIS late season, Bonnet creek had shrunk to a shallow ribbon of water moving sluggishly along its sandy bed. Killane crossed it where the wagon tracks cut through the creek's channel, and from a rise in the trail he could see the nester settlement a quarter mile up-stream. They were scrubby little frame and adobe structures that spoke of the poverty of families living in them, clustered together for comfort and protection.

These people, Killane understood, had settled here against the liking of the big ranchers who were the power in the county. Sam McRimmon, Will Tarrant, and Lafe Hanson, with

the unyielding pride of their kind, had asked only to be allowed to live in peace, to grub out an existence for their wives and children. Luxuries for them amounted to a few pipes of tobacco or enough cheap calico for a new dress, an occasional stick of candy for the children.

It was, Killane remembered, from such a mean existence that he had sprung. He had watched his mother and father work themselves to death trying to build security and comfort out of a little strip of bottom land back in Texas. But times had been hard just after the war between the States, and the pressure of big neighboring ranches who wanted no competition had been against them. It had been easy for young Killane to try for the easy money offered by a running iron and a fast gun.

The men and their older children were working in the grain fields that flanked the east bank of the river. Killane turned his horse towards them, noting the rich color of the ripe wheat they were cutting. Bax McRimmon, a stripling thirteen-year-old, recognized the rider, sang out to his father:

"Hey, pop, here comes the new school teacher."

Sam McRimmon stopped swinging his scythe, and bent a glance on the horseman. He turned to the two men near him, spoke a word, and they stopped working. Young Bax started to put down the roll of twine he had been using to tie up sheafs of wheat.

"There's no call for you to stop working, son," McRimmon said.

Killane dismounted at the edge of the field. He strode through the stubbles, studying the faces of the three men waiting for him. They showed him no unfriendliness, only the hard-willed stubbornness of men who knew what had brought Killane here and were ready to refuse him. They had their minds made up.

Killane halted, cast an approving glance over the field. "You've got some nice-looking grain here," he offered.

Will Tarrant, a big-boned man whose weight had been filed down by a lifetime of hard work, was their spokesman.

"It's a likely looking crop," he said. "But the signs point to rain inside the next couple days." He added meaningly, "And we've got to get this wheat in."

Killane smiled. He took the scythe from the squatter's hands, balanced it in his grip. "I haven't used one of these things since I was a kid. I'll spell you men for a while."

It was his way of telling these men that he was familiar with the sweat and aches of harvesting a crop of grain. He swung the blade through the wheat in long, measured strokes. The breeze, he noticed, furrowed the grain-heavy wheat tops like ripples on the surface of

water. To him it was a pretty sight. To these work-gnarled men, that breeze promised a rain soon to come, and the wheat was life itself to them and their families.

Killane talked while he worked. "My pa squatted on a piece of land back in Texas. It was good bottom land, and rich, but he never had much of a chance. I know you men are up against that."

Will Tarrant said, "You didn't come here to tell us that."

Killane raised his eyes briefly. He said, "No," and he put his words together carefully. "I just wanted you to know that I understand your problems. I think I can help you men."

Sam McRimmon put his thoughts bluntly. "You came here to sell us on the school, Killane."

Killane admitted that. He glanced at McRimmon. "Does the idea of educating your children have to be sold to you?"

McRimmon grunted acridly, and gave no reply to that. Lafe Hanson spoke up stolidly.

"You can't get around us by helpin' cut our wheat, Killane. Sure, we'd like our kids to have an education, but your school don't go with us. We ain't got time or money for it. If your dad was a farmer, you'd know that."

Killane murmured, "I'm not asking you for money. Maybe the county expects you to pay taxes and support the school—if it opens—but I didn't come here to talk about that. It's a bridge we haven't got to yet."

Will Tarrant stated dryly, "None of us here have much. We've got women and kids who need food and clothing, and that job takes all our time. We need the help of our kids. We all have to work, or we don't eat. Your school is out, Killane. We can't eat book learning."

Killane put down his scythe, turned to face the three men. He said slowly, "Let me tell you something. There's more in books than you know. A book can give you the experiences of a thousand men and a thousand years. It can tell you how to get more from your land, how to irrigate and plant and what crops will grow best."

"You don't know that because none of you can read. You never had the time or chance to learn. Your kids can't read, and you're not giving them the chance to learn."

McRimmon flared. "It ain't a case of not wantin' them to learn. A man has to crawl before he walks. Our kids have their job laid out for them whether we like it or not. They've got to help us with the work so they can eat. Even if they can't get their book learnin', they've got to do their chore of work!"

Killane said nothing, waiting.

The nester went on bitterly, "My God, man, don't you think we want the best for our kids! Do you think we like to see our women grubbing in their dirt-floored shacks, and getting

nothing for it? My wife went to town with a dollar and a quarter last week. It took her nearly a year to save it, and all she wanted was enough material for a new dress. But she saw Bax lookin' at a jackknife in the store, and she saw Tess and Sara and little Cort looking into the candy jar. And she knew I needed a few rifle shells, so maybe I could shoot us some meat before the deer go up into the hills this fall."

"So Bax got his knife, and Tess, Sara and Cort got their stick candy, and I got some rifle shells. But my wife didn't get her new dress. She didn't say anything about it. She'll start saving pennies again, hopin' that next year she can get enough calico, but maybe next year will be like this year. If it is, she won't complain because she knows we're doin' the best we can. That's why your school is out with us, Killane. Now get on your hoss, and stop wastin' our time!"

But Killane didn't turn away. He looked at the three men, and he knew what was in them. They were proud, and they held the bitterness of men who knew they were doing all they could for their families, and that what they were doing was not enough.

Killane said, "You might at least hear out my proposition."

Will Tarrant moved his heavy shoulders wearily. "It'll do you no good with us—but let's leave it."

Killane said, "School will be five days a week, and if school opens I'll see that your kids are let out every day in time to get home and help out here with the work. They'll have a couple of hours, anyhow. And I'll come out Saturdays and Sundays to make up for the work they missed coming to school durin' the week."

He saw hope trace itself through the weathered faces of the squatters. Then Sam McRimmon spoke out, wary in his stiff pride. "That's makin' us a big offer, Killane. Why are you willin' to do that for us?"

Killane shrugged. "That doesn't matter."

"It does with us," McRimmon said stubbornly.

Killane said almost harshly, "Then say it's because I want to see your kids get a break I didn't get! Call it anything you want, but that's how it stands. Will you take it?"

The three men hesitated. They looked at each other, doubtful and yet hopeful. Then, slowly, they nodded.

RUSS KILLANE rode away from the wheat field with the feeling that his first hard battle had been won. But it was, he knew, a hollow victory. He had little on which to build his hope for opening the school. The squatters had agreed because they had everything to gain, and nothing to lose.

But there were still the county's big ranchers to face, and he knew the hard-willed stubbornness that would be in Anse Duvall and Seth Ackers. They were the men who, in the beginning at least, would be expected to pay the increased taxes that would finance the school. The county's lease on the town building that had been converted into the school was soon to expire. It would be up to Duvall and Ackers to put up the bulk of the money necessary, if a new lease were to be taken on the school building.

And after Duvall and Ackers, there was Gus Marrant. Gus Marrant wanted the land the school was on because of its centralized location. Having that land, he could build a larger and more elaborate saloon and gambling hall. There had been growing rumors of a new railroad spur to be built from Junction to the mines in the foothills to the north. That would put new life into the range town, an influx of new business and more money from the outside.

Killane's route toward Anse Duvall's ranch headquarters took him west and back across Bonnet creek. A quarter mile from the stream the land roughened, cut by arid draws, and here the bunch grass was dry and sick with thirst, presenting an ever-present danger of range fire. Killane pinched his cigarette out carefully.

He came to a sun-burned meadow that was studded with low outcroppings of granite, and ahead was the steep slope of a ridge, topped with a dark belt of pines. Something moved up there in the pines. Killane saw it, like the shifting of a shadow. Whatever it was, it had moved briefly and stilled.

Killane drew rein, suddenly uncertain and wary. He looked for danger up there in the trees, but couldn't see it. The trees were etched dark against the skyline, and he could see their long shadows, cast by the westering sun. Nothing moved.

But a horse up there on the ridge whickered impatiently. Killane's mouth hardened, and he was swiftly struck by a feeling that there was nothing good for him in this place. There was danger that he could sense, but not see. His nerves thinned out and tightened, and he wished he had accepted the gun the preacher had offered. But a pistol would have been worthless here. The meadow he was in was too open and unprotected, and the distance to the pines on the ridge was good only for a rifle.

And it was a rifle that split the afternoon's silence. The sharp sound punched down from the ridge, and Killane heard it even as he felt the impact of the bullet hitting the horse under him. The animal leaped, a convulsive lunge of mortally stricken flesh, and went down. Killane swung clear, acting by instinct to throw himself behind the animal's body. A voice

from the ridge called down to him mockingly.

"That'll do you no good, teacher! There's another gun down the line. You're whip-sawed!"

Monty Tigue—Killane recognized the voice and a hot, futile anger plunged through him. He hadn't expected Gus Marrant's killers to act so soon, and that, he knew, had been a fatal mistake. They had followed him out of town, choosing their own time to strike, and they had set a trap that offered him no escape.

A second shot crashed and he felt the whip of the slug passing over his body. This bullet had come from farther south on the ridge. That would be the second killer, Tode Ricker. Killane cursed softly.

Ricker's voice floated down derisively. "You like that, Killane? You asked for it, mister!"

They were only playing with him now, killers who were bleakly sure of themselves and so could afford a moment's cruel humor. They wanted to throw fear and panic into him, to make him realize that he was dead before they drove their slugs into his body.

There was nothing for Killane to do but run for it. It was futile, and he knew that, but there was a stubborn streak in him that would not let him quit without fighting. He lunged to his feet, and heard Monty Tigue's quick laughter.

"You're makin' this too easy, Killane!"

He hurdled the body of the horse, but his boot caught in the loose bridle, and that tripped him up. He plunged heavily toward a low hump of granite outcropping. He heard the spiteful cry of a rifle as he struck the rocky ground. A heavy blow struck his temple.

He knew he was moving spasmodically, but he was only vaguely conscious of lurching to his feet, of the murderous yammering of the rifles on the ridge—then he was falling again.

He kept trying to move, trying to make a fight of it, but he couldn't force life into his muscles. Pain was in his head, deep-driven and sickening, and darkness was coming down upon him.

He heard some close voice say dispassionately, "Sure, why not, Monty? Fire would give him a nice send-off to hell!"

And that was all he heard.

CHAPTER THREE

Red Harvest

HE COULD smell cloth burning, and the stench of burning hair. An intolerable hurt was spreading along his arm, and that brought consciousness back to Russ Killane. He sat up, and looked dully at the charred, smoking cloth of his shirt sleeve. He moved instinctively to pinch the fire out of the cloth. He was sick, and his head pulsed

with ache, and he couldn't get his mind working.

He coughed, and pulled more smoke deep into his lungs. He coughed again, and that spasmodic working of his lungs brought his mind awake. He saw the flames all around him. So they had thought he was dead, he thought, and had fired the range to destroy the evidence of their murder! Yet they had been too sure of themselves—and so they had failed to make sure of him. A little savagely now he remembered Monty Tigue's mocking laughter—himself stumbling and falling . . . there had been an outcropping of granite close in front of his head. . . .

He pushed to his feet, and dizziness played with his sense of balance. Smoke burned and watered his eyes. He needed clean, pure air in his lungs, but all he could get was smoke. It was all around him, thick and gray, ruddy with heat near the ground. The sickening stench of burning hair and flesh was close to him, and he knew the fire had reached the body of his horse.

He thought, *I must have headed almost due west. . . .*

But he could not see the body of his slaughtered animal; and thus could not be sure. His sense of direction was gone. There was no east or west in this world of running flame and heat and smoke.

He retreated from the rising heat of burning grass, only to be halted by another line of fire. He tried another direction, and was forced back, and panic began slugging him.

He bent low, choking and coughing, trying to use his eyes to find a way out of this flaming pocket. But his eyes were useless, blinded by smoke. He stumbled over a rock, fell into a burning clump of grass. He scrambled to his feet, slapping fire from his clothes.

He thought savagely, *All I can do is pick a direction, and run until I go down. . . .*

But that wouldn't take long, he knew. He would be starting his run dizzy and half sick, with lungs already crying for clean, pure air. And if he picked the deep end of the burning meadow, he would never live long enough to find out if he had been wrong.

Killane turned, making his choice of direction, bent to run. . . . He thought he heard a man's distant shout. . . .

He spun, risking seconds while fire ate through the grass toward him. Now it seemed as though his lungs were on fire, and his senses swirled from lack of oxygen, and his heart pounded the walls of his chest for air.

But he heard that shout again, the voice of one of the squatters. It gave Killane a direction, a target on which to pin his uncertain thoughts. He broke into a loose, shambling run, trying not to breathe any more smoke than was necessary. His eyes were blind and

useless. He stumbled through charred and burning grass that turned the soles of his boots fire hot. He ran, and the flame seemed to run through the grass with him, fanned by the afternoon breeze.

He heard Will Tarrant's tight shout, "The fire's got too big of a start—we'll have to make a stand on the Bonnet!"

Killane stumbled and fell.

"Wait!" another squatter suddenly yelled. "By the Almighty, there's that new teacher! It's Killane!"

They dragged Killane onto one of their horses, and retreated before the charging flames. In the thick dry grass of this broken stretch of land, there was no place for them to make a stand. They drew rein on the bank of Bonnet Creek.

"If we stop that fire this side of Thunder canyon, we'll have to do it here!" Sam McRimmon said.

Fresh air had cleaned the smoke out of Killane's lungs, reviving his brain. He slid from the back of Will Tarrant's horse, waded into the ankle deep current of the Bonnet, and splashed water over his face. He straightened, and found the three squatters watching him grimly, waiting for an explanation.

He told them what had happened, and Lafe Hanson cursed bitterly. "You and your damn school! You beat up Gus Marrant, and he sics his killers on you. They thought they drilled you, and fired the range to destroy your body. But instead of you, this fire will wipe out everything we worked for."

"It will if we stand here and talk about it," Will Tarrant broke in.

They fanned out along the bank of the Bonnet, calling on their wives and sons for help. They tried to clear out the brush, form a lane of bare earth that would trap the advancing flames, but the fight was futile. They had no time for it.

The evening breeze whipped up and gave an inexorable speed to the fire. It forced them back across the creek, to the east side, and they knew then their fields of wheat were lost.

But they didn't stop fighting. They were bitter and beaten, and they knew that once the fire crossed their narrow strip of land it would sweep unchecked across Seth Ackers' giant Fencerail range. They had no reason to love the rancher who had more than once tried to drive them away from the Bonnet. But they did not let that stop them.

Will Tarrant said grimly, "Our only hope is to use our wheat field for a backfire. If we work fast and careful, there's enough of us here to keep it from gettin' out of control."

Lafe Hanson spoke up with dark bitterness. "The Fencerail never gave us a break."

"If Seth Ackers was satan himself, I wouldn't stand by and watch good land like

that wasted by fire!" Sam McRimmon growled.

They built their backfire in the wheatfield, and held the flames in check with wet burlap and shovels of dirt. The wildfire jumped Bonnet Creek, as they had known it would, and roared into the field of grain. They fought with heat and smoke and falling ash all around them, and later they moved back and watched the fire burn itself out.

Killane saw a small, worn woman move up to her husband. They stood there, Will Tarrant and his wife, and looked at the black scar that once had been their field of ripened grain. The woman was crying softly. . . .

ANSE DUVALL, who owned the big Crowfoot ranch, was a man made arrogant by his success in business and in politics. Hard-faced and powerful of body, he had carved his ranch out of open frontier, and in his time he had fought Indians and renegade whites to hold his land. To a cowman of Anse Duvall's kind, a squatter was just as much to be hated and stamped out as rustlers or tick fever. He listened Russ Killane out with the obdurate impatience of a man whose mind was already made up. And in the end he stated his argument in a blunt, inflexible tone.

"Killane, as long as you say your school will be open to them squatters' kids, you're wastin' your time with me. And I'm speakin' for the Fencerail, too! We're different outfits, but when it comes to the school and squatters, me and Seth Ackers see eye to eye. Them dirt farmers are out!"

Russ Killane was silent the full time it took him to build a cigarette. His temple ached dully where he had fallen against that granite out-crop during the meadow fight, he had used up his last strength in stopping the range fire, and there were a dozen ash burns on the exposed skin of his face and arms. It was difficult for him to keep his temper now.

But he said quietly, "This is supposed to be a free country, Mr. Duvall."

The rancher nodded curtly. "It is," he answered. "Which gives them nesters the right to move out any time they've had enough around here."

Killane held his tone level. "A free country guarantees every man his choice of honest work, to live where he wants, to educate himself and his children. Do you think you're playing according to the rules, Mr. Duvall?"

"I make my own rules, Killane."

Killane answered, softly bitter, "The squatters have a right to the little strip of land they filed on along Bonnet Creek. But you and Seth Ackers have been freezing them out. You've charged them toll to cross your land when they go to town. You've ordered the Junction store owners to give the squatters no credit.

You've used every trick and pressure to crowd them off the land they've got a legal right to own."

"I'm a cowman, and they're two-bit farmers who squatted on land I used to run cattle on!" It was the solid core of his argument, and nothing could hammer the hard-grained intolerance out of him.

Duvall said flatly, "It'll be up to the taxpayers to put up enough money to renew the lease on the school property. That means the bulk of the money will come from me and Seth Ackers, and we shore ain't goin' to buy an education for a bunch of squatter kids. We'll hire in private teachers first."

"And what if the farmers put up their share of money for the school?" Killane asked.

Anse Duvall grunted derisively. "Any time they can fork out that kind of dinero, I'll call off my dogs."

Russ Killane smiled tightly. "You keep that in mind, Duvall. You've made yourself a deal."

GUS MORRANT'S saloon was going full blast when Russ Killane returned to Junction on a horse he had borrowed from one of the squatters. Revelry at this late hour of a mid-week night would have been inspired, Killane knew, by Gus Morrant himself—and the success of the latter's plans.

Killane dismounted in front of the saloon. From inside he could hear the scuff and scrape of boots, the loud confusion of men's voices, the thin laughter of a percentage girl over the tinny music of a piano. He balanced these familiar sounds against the thought of Seth Hurley, and the hope which had driven that preacher to gain a parole for a Yuma prisoner he had never seen before. But Hurley had believed his risk of helping free a convicted outlaw was worth the chance of getting the school he wanted for his community.

Killane pushed into the saloon, unnoticed by the crowd at the long bar. He crossed the room with his head down, to obscure the details of his face from the first idle glances that were turned his way. He passed the end of the bar, bent his direction into the dimly lighted hall. He moved slower now.

He came to the door at the end of the hallway and halted there, listening to the speaking of Tigues, Ricker, and Gus Morrant.

Killane smiled faintly. He couldn't make out the words, but he could place the men from the loudness of their tones. Monty Tigues would be the closest—within a stride or two of the door. Killane gripped the knob, and when the men started speaking again, he twisted the knob and pushed. He didn't open the door fast. He was methodical and coldly deliberate, seeing what he needed to see as he swung the door open, yet moving too casually

to jerk sudden, startled attention to himself.

He was inside the room and had the door shut before Monty Tigie heard the slight sound he made and glanced idly around. The man's jaw sagged, and that was where Killane hit him. He had Tigie's gun when the other crashed heavily to the floor.

Across the room Gus Marrant yelled and plunged to his feet, kicking his chair behind him. Tode Ricker spun, and recognition drained all the color out of his face. He reached instinctively for his gun, but he did not complete his draw.

Killane laughed mockingly. "That's right, Ricker—now you're using your head. Better get a good hold on it now—and don't let go!"

Ricker's hands slowly rose.

Gus Marrant moved guardedly around the end of his desk, careful to keep his hands high. Now that his first shock at seeing Killane was out of him, a streak of amusement came into his stare. He was, Killane knew, the kind of a man who could find mirth in any dangerous situation. And he was all the more deadly because of it, this gambler, shrewd and treacherous.

Marrant's chuckle was disarmingly genuine. "It looks like Tigie and Ricker owe me a hundred dollars per each. You're not as dead as they claimed."

Killane drifted away from the door, placing the wall to his back. He said, with soft mockery, "I'm worth more than two hundred dollars, Marrant."

The gambler nodded at this, and his eyes were darkly speculative. "I know that now. I should have guessed it when you gave me that beating. You're tough, Killane."

This was, Killane knew, the gambler's way of feeling him out, plumbing his strength and trying to find his weakness. Marrant was adding things up and finding his answer.

"You gave me a licking, and lived through the trap Ricker and Tigie set for you. I own every man in this saloon, but you got in. You dropped Tigie, and grabbed his gun before he hit the floor. And you act like you can use it."

Killane murmured, "Better than you can guess, Marrant."

The gambler smiled at this, but now his humor flattened out to a grim understanding. "Yeah, you're tough—plenty, and a man don't get that way reading books and teaching school. And even if you'd been running a school somewhere, you'd have got more sun than your face shows. So you've been some place where you couldn't get much sun. Where was it—Yuma?"

"You win the blue chips, Marrant."

The gambler cursed with sudden harshness.

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"Then why the hell didn't you say so? I could have handed you a job the first day you showed up!"

"I play my own games, Morrانت." Killane paused to let this sink home. Then he said coldly, "I'm still playing my own hand, friend, so don't let yours slide any nearer your guns."

Morrانت swore with flaring anger. "Don't be a fool, Killane! What in seven kinds of Hades do you expect to get out of starting a school here. It'll pay pennies to what I can—" his voice dropped off sharply, and his eyes narrowed—"so that's it!" he breathed. "You know I want the land the school is on. You're usin' that to get your price out of me. Well, I won't bicker about it. How much?"

Killane said slowly, "You hit it right, in the end, every time, don't you?"

"I know Yuma," the gambler snapped. "And I know the men that leave there. They've all got their price. You've got yours. How much, Killane?"

Killane shrugged. "This seems to be your show."

"Then I'll set the price," Morrانت snapped. "A thousand dollars cash, Killane! And I want your guarantee to leave town tonight."

Killane smiled grimly. "And what makes my guarantee worth anything to you?"

Gus Morrانت made a motion toward his guns. "These," he said harshly. "These guns, and what I've learned about you, Killane. I never sell a man short twice. You show up in this town again, and you'll never live to ride out!"

IT WAS the following Monday, the day school was scheduled to open, when Russ Killane rode down from the camp he had made in the foothills, and into town. He came in from the north, and that took him past Morrانت's saloon. He saw Tode Ricker striding out of the swing doors, only to halt abruptly, stare briefly and intently at the man in the saddle. Then Ricker spun and disappeared through the winged doors. That would be, Killane knew, Gus Morrانت's warning that the teacher had returned to town.

Killane made a short stop at the court house, and when he came back to his horse he was smiling faintly at the surprise that had been on the face of the clerk inside.

There was a hostile temper to the town that Killane could feel and almost sourly taste as he jogged his horse on up the street. It was in the crowd gathered in front of the school, squatters and their children scattered on one side, cowmen and townsfolk bunched in a larger group on the opposite corner of the building.

Killane pulled in at the hitch-rail, dismounted. As he straightened, his hand brushed the gun that sagged on his hip. He looked at Will

Tarrant and nodded. Tarrant nodded back.

Still, the expression of leashed hatred in the faces of the three farmers puzzled him. He looked across the school front at Anse Duvall, and the cowman spat contemptuously.

"Killane, you've got your gall comin' back here!"

Killane frowned. There was more here than he could understand.

He said slowly, "My job is to open the school. Why shouldn't I be here?"

Gus Morrانت, flanked by Monty Tigue and Tobe Ricker, came down the street to hear this puzzled question. Morrانت answered it in a coldly mocking voice.

"I don't reckon you'll be opening any school, mister! Folks here don't cater much to the idea of havin' a man from Yuma prison teach their kids how to grow up."

It straightened Russ Killane like the impact of a blow. He hadn't expected this, but here it was, bitter and sharp and brutal. It explained the hatred in the faces of the squatters, cowmen, and townsfolk alike. It explained the disillusioned contempt in the eyes of Seth Hurley, in the preacher's self-blaming silence. Killane looked at Gus Morrانت, and found his answer to all this in the latter's derisive smile.

"So you told them!" Killane whispered. And his tone strengthened, turning flat and harsh. "You spread it around that I was fresh out of Yuma. I might have expected that, Morrانت."

The gambler sneered. "And you got it!"

Killane threw one sharp and bitter glance at the men and women in front of the school. "You were quick to grab up what Morrانت told you, weren't you? I was good enough to fight for this school for you, but because I'd made my mistakes in the past and spent time in prison, you were ready to tromp me down again."

Will Tarrant spoke up truculently. "It wasn't that, Killane! It was hearin' about the deal you made with Morrانت, guaranteein' not to open the school."

Hearing this took some of the hot anger out of Russ Killane. He said, "You might at least have waited today out before passing judgment on me." He swung his glance back to Gus Morrانت. "You thought you'd copped all the bets, didn't you?" he said softly. "Only it won't work, Morrانت."

He watched the gambler's eyelids pull together until there was only the narrow glint of dark anger between them. "You made all the rules in this war over the school," Killane said steadily. "You were so all-fired sure of yourself. But you're forgettin' it was you—your own words—that rigged up that deal in your saloon. I made no promises when I took your thousand dollars. I left town, but I didn't agree not to come back. You were so cock-

sure I had my price that you double-crossed yourself! You even crossed yourself with that money, Marrant. I just spent it at the court house to buy a five year lease to the school property!"

The gambler moved without an expression to betray his intent. He yelled to the men beside him, "Get him!" and his hand plunged.

His gun swept up and roared, but Killane's lead was already in him, and the gambler's bullet spent itself in the dust of the street. There were shouts and gunfire, the smoke and spitting flame, the pain and the violence, and Killane's memory never gave him an entirely clear picture of what happened.

But Monty Tigue went down, loose and lifeless. And Killane felt the jolting impact of the slug that drove him into the dust of the street. But he came up again and felt his bent elbow dig into the dust with the recoil of his gun. And he watched Tobe Ricker fall.

And then there were men all round him, townsmen and ranchers and squatters. And there was a woman crying out in a strong, clear voice, "He's hurt, can't you see that? Get him to a doctor!"

But she was not heeded by these men who had fought their battles, and knew there were more important things at hand than the flesh wound high in Killane's shoulder.

Anse Duvall said in his firm, heady voice, "A man who can fight like you did for what he thinks is right, is good enough for me to ride with!"

Killane smiled. "The money I paid on the new lease was in the squatters' names, Duvall."

The rancher bridled. "Who said anything about that?" he growled. "After seein' what I just seen, I'd have paid for that lease myself. And be proud to have my kids sit next to the sons of these squatters. But you've got to be up there in front teachin' them!"

Killane shook his head. "You're forgetting I've just been paroled from Yuma."

Anse Duvall snorted scornfully. "The only difference between you and me is you got caught, and I didn't. How do you figure I got started in the cow business? I never hunted up the mammy of every calf I put my brand on. Now get in there and open school before I talk myself plumb into prison!"

HE LOST HIS HIDE

ONE afternoon, in the late spring of 1880, "Dutch" Charley Burris and "Big Nose" George Parrott, with two other unnamed outlaws, learned at Rawlins, Wyoming, that a Union Pacific pay car was coming through that night. The four rode out of town and prepared to derail the westbound train. Spikes holding the rails were withdrawn but the waiting bandits were discovered by a track-walker, who flagged the train.

A posse was formed under the leadership of Edward Widowfield and Tip Vincent, of Rawlins, both expert trailers. The two outdistanced their companions and were promptly drygulched by the desperadoes.

Mounted on the dead men's horses, the outlaws escaped, but were caught in Montana.

Wyoming officials arrived, shackled the hands and feet of the two murderers and took them on the train back to Rawlins. A mob met the party at Carbon, forty miles from their destination and managed to drag Dutch Charley from the train and lynch him.

Shackled in his cell, with one leg in an Oregon boot, Big Nose managed somehow to file off this impediment. Then he lurked in wait for his jailer, knocked the latter unconscious with the iron boot and would have escaped if the jailer's wife hadn't slammed the door shut.

At midnight, a mob arrived and removed George from his cell. A ladder was placed against a telegraph pole, a noose was adjusted about the outlaw's neck and he was forced to climb the ladder. When he would not jump, the ladder was removed and the fall of Big Nose George's body broke the rope.

Another noose was provided and again the murderer was forced up the ladder. This time he clasped his arms about the pole and refused to let go when the ladder was pulled away. The mob, however, was patient and finally Big Nose could hold on no longer.

Among the onlookers was Dr. John E. Osborne, who after an autopsy, the story goes, kept enough of the outlaw's hide to make a pair of shoes which he is said to have proudly worn. Later the good doctor became governor of Wyoming.





The kid was half senseless—
but he was holding the colt
across the two horses. . . .

TRIGGER- SUDDEN

The Kid didn't know any way of earning his spurs and guns—except to get himself killed. And maybe that wouldn't do it, either!

THE boy stood with his head bowed and moving awkwardly in his boots, filled and awed by the powerful presence of the man who stood against the fire. The man was his father, and he knew every shade of expression in his rough-hewn face, every movement of that lean, tough knit body. His father was harsh, violent, impatient of human error and weaknesses, but as rigidly demanding of himself as of other men, and to the boy he was secretly a god.

By
**T. C.
McCLARY**

For all that, he might as well have been a stranger. There was no common ground upon which the two could meet. His simple nearness brought up in the boy uncertainty and fear. Not fear of his quick, hard calloused hand as much as fear that he would do something wrong and it would give his father cause to think he was dumb. The contempt or irritation of those sun-bleached gray eyes was something that struck down into the boy's feelings like a red-hot knife. Better to keep at a distance, out of his father's thoughts and way.

His father said now, "Most boys of four-

teen would break their necks to learn how to break a mustang right. But give you the chance and you're off daydreaming some other place!"

The boy swallowed and muttered respectfully, "Yessir," in his throat.

"By God, sometimes I wonder how I sired you for a colt!" his father growled. "All right, off to bed with you. If you can lower yore pride to eat a little humble dust, we will be breaking down at Canyon Pass tomorrow."

"Yessir," the boy said, but he did not say that he would be there, and he did not raise his face. He took one last look at the gleam of the fire upon the cruel Spanish rowels on his father's boots and, trying to squeeze himself into nothing, turned away. His mother caught his arm and dragged him to her against his will, and planted a good-night kiss atop his head.

He had to swallow extra hard at that. He felt mean as dirt, but he just said gruffly, "Night, ma," he pulled away. If he stayed, he was surer than pot going to bust out and blubber, and he didn't want his pa to catch him at that for a windup. His father didn't think he had any guts, anyway.

He scuffed out of the room and stripped down to his winter flannels and climbed into bed. Salt made a sharp sting upon his eyes, and his throat was raw. The taste of blood was on his lips from biting his arm when he fell asleep. He would have given his swell barlow knife if he could undo his father's catching him trying to rope that mustang out in Mesquite Draw.

BIG TIM DREW smoked clean through a cigar before hurling the end into the fire and looking at his wife. "By thunder, I wish I knew what to do!" He scowled. "It is a terrible thing to be strangers with yore own son." Bafflement showed through the irritation of his gaze. "Addie, what the tarnation do I do wrong? I am willing to work with him, to show him how things are done, but he will not come around! You might think this wasn't his ranch, some day."

She looked at him with troubled gaze, then tore her glance away. "He's—so afraid of your seeing he might be wrong, Tim."

"Softness," he grunted, "has no place on this tough range. A man has got to know how to do things the way they should be done."

"Maybe," she suggested, "if he just had a little responsibility of his own, Tim."

"Good Lord!" he exploded. "Whose ranch is this, if not his own?"

"But it's different," she pointed out. "The ranch is you. I mean something absolutely his own." She looked up abruptly, eyes alight

with hope, but filled with a woman's timidity at breaking into man's business, too. "Tim couldn't you—give him that sorrel and her colt?"

He bit at his graying mustache and turned his face away. "I don't want to be harsh," he growled, "but a man should earn the things he gets. What in pot has he done to earn it, Addie? He is not even a decent horse-handler yet."

"But he isn't a man yet, Tim," she pointed out gently. "Even for his years, he is young." She dropped her head and her hands moved nervously in her lap. "I've always thought that infection he had made him timid and held him back."

He scowled into the fire, and then caught the swallow of tears in her throat. He turned and moved his rangy body across the room and, with an awkward gentleness, put out a rope-hardened hand and lifted up her chin. "Why, yo're crying, Addie," he said, appalled.

She nodded and bit her lower lip. "You both want so much to be close—but every month yore growing farther and farther apart!"

He smoothed the tight-pulled plaits of her hair and stooped and gave her a rough kiss. "Well, I will try yore way and give him the mare and colt! But you will have to find some way that he thinks he's earned it. I will not come more than halfway."

At breakfast, she said to the boy, "I am making some pudding this morning, Tim. Would you ride a tin of it out to yore pa?"

He squirmed at being trapped like this, but he could not think of any excuse to offer. He said, "Yessum," and dunked his doughnut in the coffee.

She smiled and moved briskly to and fro. "If you'd show some interest down there today, yore pa might give you the sorrel for yore very own."

The boy froze and his eyes grew large and round. "Gee!" he murmured. Then, on an unhappy note, "But he wouldn't trust the sorrel to me, ma! He don't think I even know how to care for a hoss!"

"Well, why don't you try helping with the mustangs and see?" she suggested.

The boy delivered the tin at dinner time and afterwards stood around self-consciously, watching the boys rope and break a cavy of wild horses. No effort was ever made to really gentle and train these mustangs. They were scrubs, used half wild for the tough work on the ranch, and not much besides toughness was ever expected of them. The cow ponies and driving stock were picked from bred and blooded horses.

Nobody paid much attention to the boy. Nobody suggested he do anything, and he

stood out of the way, feeling useless and sure his father had forgotten he was there. Then suddenly, his father was in a tight spot with a bad actor over by a branding fire, and called out, "Tim!"

The boy was so startled, he failed to move.

"Damn it, wake up!" his father snapped. "Take a dolly on this critter's free hoof!"

It took the boy an eternity to get his lasso off and a loop spinning, just because he wanted to act promptly. Then he cast, and it was in too much of a hurry, and the throw missed. He had to pull in and make another toss, and in the meantime, his father, afoot, took a mean raking across the fire. He got burned, and even though he said nothing beyond a little cussing, the boy turned purple and could not look at his father the rest of the day.

HIS father told him at supper, "Well, you didn't do too bad. Leastwise, you swallowed yore fright." He stopped dead and looked at his wife, not knowing the gentle way to do something—not being able to bring himself to offer something of which he did not fully approve.

The boy felt startled into a kind of feverish happiness, and then at the break in his father's conversation, felt bitterness eat his happiness away. His mother said, "Yore pa wants to give you the sorrel and colt, Tim, but he is such a rough timber wolf, he don't know how to offer anything decent-like."

"Well, yore ma's explained it," his father growled. "But you will take care of that mare and colt proper, or answer to me, mister!"

The boy looked down at his plate. "I don't want it," he said glumly.

His father stared at him. "You don't want it? Well that is a pretty answer to a present!"

His mother shot him a silencing look. She asked the boy, "Why don't you want it, Tim?"

"I don't want anything he don't think I've earned," he blurted. "And I didn't earn nothin' but a good wallopin' today!"

Humor streaked his father's bleak eyes, and when he got up from the table he came around and gave the boy's neck a ruffing. "You take that hoss and colt," he said, "and see you keep 'em the way you ought! If you don't know something come and ask it. Nobody is going to jump on you for not knowing. It's for not tryin' you'll get the wallopin'."

The kid was so taken up with his new present he didn't have much time to get to feeling sorry for himself or pull boners, after that. He was up at dawn and out working with the sorrel and her colt darned near all of every day. He didn't know it, but his father watched him pretty closely, stopping up in a break of the hills above the graze and watching the boy doing with patience

and gentleness and love what better horsemen could not have done with a surer but more savage hand.

"Well, mebbe he'll work out in time," the old man said to his mother. "A little gentleness with hosses is a good thing. But there are times for toughness in the running of a ranch, and I would give my eyeteeth to see something give that boy some gumption!"

"Just give a little time instead, Tim," she suggested.

The range was getting right sharp with cold now, and the blizzards might begin almost any day. The blizzards never lasted long—there was no real iced-up winter down this way—but they could be tough while they lasted and it was good to have in supplies. With that in mind, Big Tim took the boy and they drove in to Abilene.

It was the first time the boy had ever been to a big town, and his father thought he would spend the day digging into every corner and seeing every sight. But in the five times he saw the boy that afternoon, he had not wandered half a block. He was hanging around Rice's Gun Smithy like a fly around sugar. The thing that had caught his eye was the new Colt Paterson revolver.

Big Tim stood across the street watching him press his face against the glass window, but the boy didn't say much about it when he called him to help load up. He just said once while loading, "I reckon a pistol like that Paterson costs a heap of money, pa?"

"They ain't cheap," his father said and slanted him a shrewd side glance. "But a gun like that is somethin' mighty special. First, a man should know how to use it, and second, prove he's got the guts to use it if he has to."

He just said that and let it sink in. They finished loading and then, curious himself, although he would not admit it, he walked back with the boy and took him into Rice's. He used a heavy Sharp's himself, and swore by it, but this Colt was really something.

It had brass trimming, and darned fine horses etched around the cylinder, and its balance was something that could not be denied. A small brass sight had been let into the octagonal barrel of blue finish, and there was no ramrod to bother with and no trigger guard. But next to its fine balance, the real thing was the trick combination bullet and powder flask that loaded five measured charges of powder into the chambers at one end while placing five round .40 caliber bullets from the other.

THE boy just stared at the gun, so bug-eyed over it he didn't know he could handle it until his father poked it into his hand. Then he just stood there gawking

at it kind of foolishly. Just holding it and hefting it like that all by himself was about as much as he could dream.

He had a small Sharp's himself, and he began to bang around a heap on the range. He practiced shooting from stand and crouch and lying down, and shooting at a blowing paper ball while he was running, and shooting while he was rolling or scuttling from rock to rock himself.

But the old man was about the best shot in all West Texas, and the kid didn't say a thing about this. His father had to find out for himself. He did, sitting up in a crotch of the big mountains, and watching the boy practicing on the range below most of an afternoon. He rode down to the house with a crease upon his brow and the irritated feeling of a man who has judged another man wrongly, and finds it out—but is not sure how far the other way he should go to reform his opinion.

He said to his wife that night, "That boy is almighty secretive, Addie! But I just can't get it into my head that he has any real sand."

"Does a boy have to be rough and tumble and hang out at the bunkhouse, Tim?"

"No," he growled. "But he cannot be afraid of things, and he is still afraid of being shown up."

"Is that so unusual?" she asked with a woman's direct way.

"Mebbe not. But it is still the way he does it—the way he ducks anything that might prove him wrong. I can't help it, Addie, it is a trait I distrust. I have never seen it in man or boy with any sense or guts, and I'd stand on hot coals rather than say that of my own son."

He's waking up to worry on his own blood, she thought, and did not do too much to relieve the worry. It is a good thing for the old wolf to try and see things from the boy's way!

But shortly, his worries were overwhelmed

by more immediate problems. In one night, winter snapped and caught the range. It grew bitter cold, and the sky was leaden, and there was every sign of a blizzard such as had not been seen in twenty years.

"No matter what," Big Tim ordered his family curtly, "Neither of you are to leave this yard without the sun out clear and bright, and even then, don't wander over a mile away."

He flicked them both a brief, hard glance, and the boy caught it like a slap in the face and dropped his head.

"What's wrong now?" his father demanded harshly.

"Nothin', only I get treated like a dumb-head!" Then, lifting his head stubbornly, "Pa, I got to go drive in my sorrel! That's my job. You said so yoreself."

"I'll have one of the boys drive it down to Purple Canyon," Big Tim told him. "When a blow hits, it's no child's play." He swung into his buffalo greatcoat and moved out.

His mother said, "Never mind, you'll get yore chance one of these days, Tim."

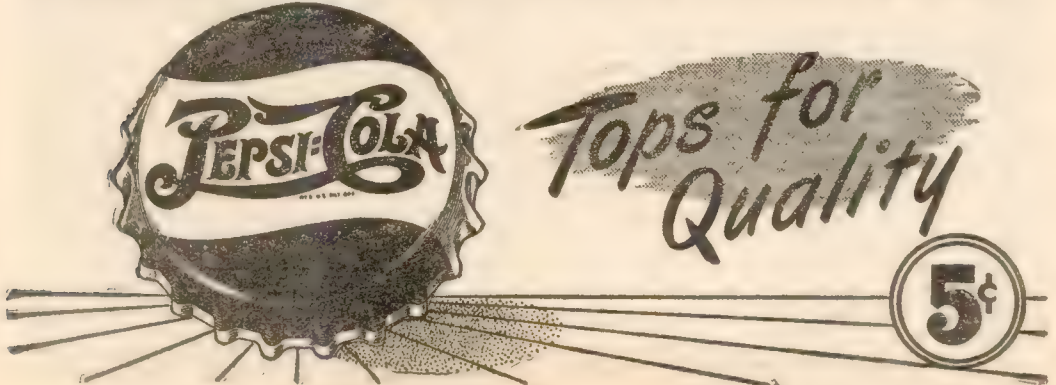
But the boy didn't answer. He kept his face averted, and scuffed moodily away.

The clouds hung on for three days. Then there was a chill, shimmering sun for a week, then out of nowhere, the blizzard struck. It came at noon when Big Tim was home, a wild and furious black hell that ripped the heat right off the house and shook the great timbers like shakes in a field. It broke as suddenly as it had come. Big Tim went out to the corral and came back in with grim anger in his face.

"A break," he said to his wife. "We will get a second dose."

He put a light to a cigar, but its taste was bitter from his anger, and he let it go dead and placed it on the mantel. They heard the wild song of the second blast coming, and it struck the house like a shipmast, bending it before its violence.

"This will drift every cow in the bottoms



up along the canyon line!" Big Tim rasped. "They'll be smothering in the drifts like minnows scooped out of a pond!" Suddenly his big, fierce face swung in a complete circle of the room. "Addie—where's Tim?"

They looked and called and his mother came back and found Big Tim paste-white beneath his leathery skin. "His coat's gone," he said. "He's sneaked out."

Her breath caught and her left hand went to the spasm in her breast. "Tim!" she cried.

He took her into his arms and his face was grim.

The shrieking violence fell and settled to a shrill, whining song, and the black hell outside paled to a steady driving gray. Big Tim climbed into his coat and lunged out, and in a moment was riding his horse out the canyon trail. A half mile out, he saw the blur staggering obliquely to the trail.

HE RODE over and found the boy frozen half senseless, with the sorrel snubbed in close to his horse. He was holding the colt across the two. Big Tim took them in and put up the horses while his wife rubbed young Tim with snow and packed him in bed. Then Big Tim went out to gather the boys along the lines and see what could be saved upon the range. He was five days gone and came back looking like a corpse.

"We saved most of the stock," he muttered thickly and, drinking a bowl of soup, fell dead asleep.

He awoke in two days and had the boy before him and said sternly, "Tim, you disobeyed yore orders."

"Yessir," Tim muttered and dropped his head.

"You could have frozen," his father said, "and been the cause of other deaths to boot." He bent his cold severity upon him. "You know what to expect?"

"Yessir," the boy said. "I knew when I started."

It took his father aback, but the strictness of his code was inflexible. The boy had a hiding coming. A double one, first for disobeying, next for being a fool. He got it, a blistering one that left him eating from the mantel a full four days. Then warm winds and a bright sun melted the snow off the lower range and his father drove off for supplies again—this time, alone.

The boy watched him go and said dismally to his mother, "He don't even trust me to help with supplies now! He ain't ever going to think decent of me again!"

"Yore pa is harsh, but he is fair, Tim," his mother told him. "Don't ever get a wrong idea!"

He looked up, startled at this coming from her, then drifted off to mope alone.

He came home late and sneaked into the house, and felt a big hot lump in his throat when he saw the cold supper his mother had left out. He felt better when he took the lamp and tiptoed into his room to bed.

SOMETHING gleaming dully on the bed caught his attention and brought him to a halt. He stared at it from the door, batting his eyes as if it were not true. He did not need to approach it, to know it was a Paterson Colt.

He slept with it in his hand all night, and he was carrying it like a treasure at breakfast time. He stopped on the threshold to the dining room, and moved awkwardly.

His father glanced at him and after a space said, "That licking was for breaking the rules, Tim. The gun is for proving you can use it, and will have the guts to use it when the time comes."

The boy stood there with the words sinking in, and suddenly, he saw. He lifted his head and his face was purple, but there was a smiling levelness to his eyes.

He said straightforwardly, "Thanks, pa. I dunno that I should get this."

"If you shouldn't," his father stated flatly, "you wouldn't have it. Take care that you use it well."

"Yessir," the boy nodded, but in those seconds, his stature had grown and expanded. He wanted to put the gun upon the table where he could look at it, but he restrained the desire and put it on the shelf. He sat down and said seriously, "I've been thinking pa."

"Well, that's hopeful," his father grunted. "What about?"

"Well, don't you think it's about time I rode with you and made myself some use around the range?"

Big Tim looked around and winked at his wife. "Got a good hoss and got a good gun, and now he's getting chesty! Addie, give him two years and it wouldn't surprise me if he got a hankering for my saddle!"

"Yessir," the boy butted in and grinned. The old man was all right, once a fellow got to know him. Ornery and harsh as all get out, but a man could do worse than take after him. When you stopped to think about it, it was a right tough range, and there wasn't time for softness and special figuring. If a man was going to carry a pistol like that flashy Paterson Colt, he had to be tough enough to back it up and fast enough to use it. He had to be just a little faster than the next man—and in the man's own line.

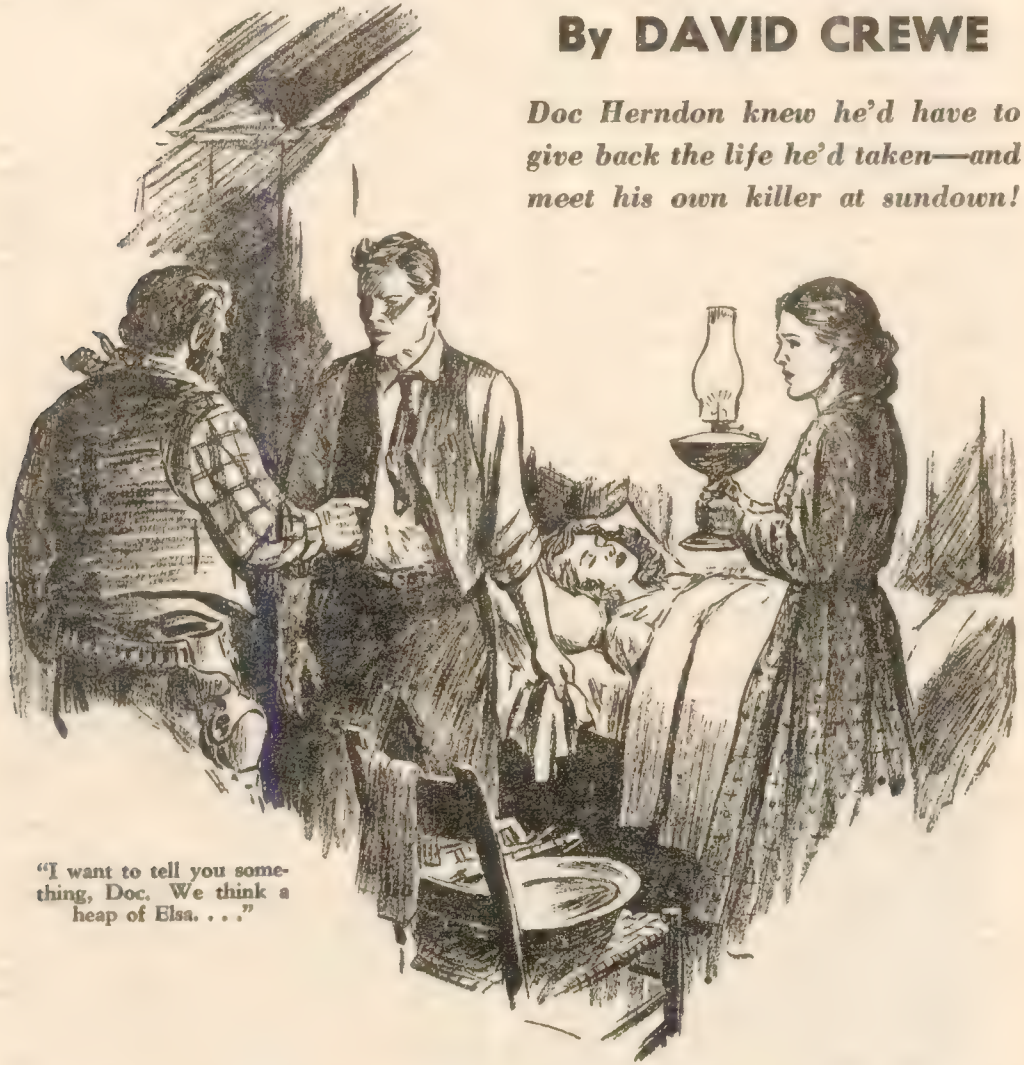
His father swung back his keen gaze and chuckled. "You are going to ride hard to hold my pace!"

"Yessir. But you'll have to ride harder than Old Nick to shake me!"

SIX-GUN CURE

By DAVID CREWE

Doc Herndon knew he'd have to give back the life he'd taken—and meet his own killer at sundown!



"I want to tell you something, Doc. We think a heap of Elsa. . ."

WHEN he got off the train he took three steps and then fell flat on his face. He tried to get up but couldn't and suddenly he was conscious of a crowd standing around him and of the sound of voices. The train whistled and started moving on. He had to get up, now—had to climb back aboard, but there wasn't any strength left in his body. He couldn't even make it to his knees. He started shouting, then, or at least he thought he did, but the train didn't stop. The sound of it grew thin and far away and was finally lost in the distance.

Someone reached down and put a hand on

his shoulder and started shaking him. A voice said, "Hey, you want to lay here all night? You want to freeze to death?"

"Too much whiskey in him," said another voice. "Leave him alone. Whoever heard of a drunk freezing to death?"

"Come on. Get up," said the first voice.

John Herndon shook his head. He didn't want to get up. He wasn't cold. He was warm. Nice and warm and he wanted to sleep, if these men would only go away and let him alone.

But they wouldn't. Hands seized him and lifted him to his feet and he was half dragged

and half carried for what seemed like a long way. Then suddenly he was in a lighted room, a room where it was hot and close and his stomach started churning up and he felt sick, sicker than he had ever been in his life. Someone gave him something to drink, something that scorched his throat and that tasted more terrible than the whiskey he had been drinking steadily for four days. And then, after a long time, he was left alone.

SHARP, bright sunlight streaming through the window woke him. He sat up and groaned and reached quickly for his head. Everything inside his skull seemed to have come loose. The room seemed to be tilting from one side to another. He closed his eyes against this dizziness—then, after a while, opened them again. The room still wouldn't stand still.

Footsteps sounded outside and a door opened as someone came into the room. Herndon looked around. The man who had come in was short and heavy and bearded and was wearing old clothes. There was a gunbelt around his waist and a heavy gun sagged in its holster.

"You really a doctor?" asked the man.

John Herndon moistened his lips. They were thick and cracked and dry. His mouth seemed stuck together.

"They threw your bags off the train with you last night," the man went on. "One of 'em was a little black bag full of medicines and stuff like old Doc Everman used to carry. What I want to know is this: Are you really a doctor?"

Herndon shook his head. He said, "Go away and leave me alone."

The man came farther into the room. He said, "Look here, mister. Maybe you feel like hell, but I don't feel so good myself. I've been up all night with my little girl. She's plenty sick. I don't know what's the matter with her. I'm askin' again, are you a doctor?"

Herndon said, "No!" He almost shouted it. Then he covered his face with his hands and shut his eyes again.

"All right, mister," said the man, slowly. "I don't know as I'd want you to look at my little girl, anyhow. I don't know as I even want you in the same country as me. They threw you off the train last night. Get on the next one that stops here and get out."

John Herndon made no answer. He heard the man stalk to the door, open it and step outside and slam it after him. Herndon groaned.

He said, "Doctor!" and his voice was thick with bitterness. After a moment he got to his feet and made his way unevenly to the window. Just outside lay the town, all that there was of it. A dozen buildings lining either side of a street. There wasn't a tree anywhere. The

buildings needed paint. They looked old, ugly. There were a few horses tied to a hitching rail in front of one of them and two wagons were in sight. The dust in the street looked thick and heavy.

There was nothing beyond the town. Nothing but a flat, sun-baked prairie with a couple of barbed wire fences stretching across it.

Herndon stared blankly through the window. He didn't know where he was. He had a notion he was somewhere in Arizona but in what part he couldn't have guessed. He recalled, suddenly, that he had advised the wealthy Mrs. Jefferson Hoyt to go to Arizona for her health and it struck him how amusing it would be if he should find her here. That thought brought a fleeting smile to his lips.

He wasn't a bad-looking man when he smiled. He had a thin face, a face that might have been strong and angular with clear gray eyes and a high forehead. Right now his eyes were red-rimmed and shadowed, but they hadn't always been like that. He was just over thirty. He might have looked it with a shave and a little rest.

A stoop-shouldered old man came suddenly through the door from the station platform. He squinted at Herndon, rubbed a hand across his face and nodded. "Feel a little better, do you?"

"When can I get a train outa here?" Herndon snapped.

"Won't be none that stops, goin' west, until late tonight. You'd have plenty of time to run out to Bill Patterson's place an' see his little girl. Bill thinks a lot of that girl of his."

Herndon's lips tightened. "Where can I get a drink?"

"I'd think you'd had about enough of drinkin', mister. Now this girl of Bill's is a pretty cute trick. She's bad sick, too."

"I'm not a doctor," Herndon grated.

He turned and headed for the door.

OUTSIDE, the early heat of the day seemed to close in around him like a blanket. It was hard to breathe. His legs were heavy and he had a difficult time moving them in a straight line. His feet kicked up puffs of yellow dust. After what seemed like a long time he came to the buildings and made out the sign of a saloon. He headed that way, staggered inside and lunged for the bar.

The whiskey, served to him by a fat, round-faced man in a dirty apron, was like molten fire. It seared its way down his throat and hit his stomach with all the force of a blow. But even at that it did something to steady him.

"You the doc they tossed off the train last night?" asked the bartender.

Herndon stiffened. "Keep your damned face shut."

"Yeah," growled the bartender. "Well, that

drink'll be a dollar." He stared at Herndon.

Herndon reached into his pocket. He didn't find his wallet. He searched through his other pockets. He couldn't find a cent.

"I said a dollar, mister," reminded the bartender.

Herndon kept feeling in his pockets. He couldn't believe his wallet was gone. A sudden panic seized him. He had never before been in a predicament like this. He didn't know what to do. He stared, wide-eyed, at the bartender. There was a scowl on the bartender's face. A rather ugly scowl.

"Try looking over there in the corner," suggested the bartender.

Herndon turned and stared toward the corner. He saw nothing but a pail and a mop and at first he didn't get it. Then two men who had just come in started laughing and he heard the bartender saying, "Get right to work, doc. You can mop the place out for the drink you just had. Stick around until tomorrow and you can mop up again for another drink."

John Herndon knew a sudden, hot flush of anger. He swung back to face the bartender. He started shouting at the man and quite abruptly the bartender was over the bar and was shoving him across the room. Herndon twisted away. He swung a clumsy fist at the bartender's head, missed, lost his balance and fell to the floor. He got to his knees and then stood up.

"Get to work," said the bartender gruffly.

John Herndon bit his lips. He felt in his pockets again and from one of them drew out a wadded piece of paper he had somehow or other missed during his previous search. It was a crumpled two dollar bill. He straightened a little and held it out to the bartender. It was funny how differently the discovery of the money made him feel.

The bartender accepted it, still scowling.

"Wait a minute, Pete," called a voice from the doorway. "That ain't enough, is it? I think he still ought to mop up."

Herndon stared that way. One of the two men who had just come into the saloon was walking forward. He was a young man with a deeply tanned face. He was rather handsome. He had dark eyes and thin, tight lips, now twisted into an amused smile. He wore a high-crowned hat, a checkered shirt and leather chaps over dark trousers. His boots were ornamented with silver and, like the man who had come to see Herndon at the station, he was wearing a gun.

"Aw, leave him alone, Ed," muttered the bartender. "He's paid up. He's got a dollar change coming."

The amused expression was still on Ed's face. He shook his head. "Nope. The drink was five dollars. He still owes you three. He's gonna work it out."

John Herndon sucked in a long, slow breath. He had never seen this man before. He was sure of it. He couldn't understand what the man could have against him. This didn't make sense. He had paid the bartender and the bartender was satisfied.

"Didn't you hear me, mister?" Ed asked. "Get that mop and get to work."

John Herndon didn't move from where he was standing. He heard the door open and knew that more people had come into the saloon but they stopped just inside the door. Ed had come up pretty close to him and was still smiling but the smile lacked humor and Ed's eyes had narrowed. They were cold, black eyes, steady and hard.

"I said, get that mop, mister, and get to work," Ed grated.

Herndon shook his head. "I paid for the drink."

Ed took a step forward. His hand shot out and caught Herndon in a slap across the face, only it wasn't like a slap. It carried all the force of a blow and it staggered Herndon backwards.

"Get that mop and get to work," Ed said again.

And as he spoke, Ed was right after him. Another slap scraped across Herndon's face, half blinding him. He staggered into a table, fell across it. Ed reached out and caught him by the shoulders, pulled him erect and shoved him toward the mop and pail in the corner.

John Herndon grasped the handle of the mop and leaned there in the corner for a moment. He wasn't conscious of a sound within the room except the sound of his own labored breathing. Anger almost choked him. He turned, slowly, to face the man who had driven him here and still holding the mop, lifted it from the pail.

"That's it," Ed grinned. "Like I said, get to work."

Without any answer at all, John Herndon raised the mop and swung it at Ed's head. The man saw it coming and tried to duck out of the way but the mop handle was long and the sopping rags of the mop caught him full in the face.

The soap or the dirty water must have momentarily blinded him for Ed backed away, howling. He lifted both hands to his eyes and started digging at them, then he suddenly dropped one hand to his gun and jerked it free. He was swearing, now, and his face was twisted with rage. Herndon lifted the mop again but he knew he would never have time to use it. He was about to be shot. He could feel the muscles of his stomach tensing against the shock of a bullet.

But he wasn't shot. A gray-mustached man, wearing a star on his vest, stepped up behind Ed and twisted the gun from his hand.

"Fun's fun, Ed," the man said slowly, "but shooting this fellow would be carrying it a little too far. I reckon we'll call the party off."

Ed jerked around to face the man who had taken his gun, "Damn you, Walsh!" he shouted. "Give me my gun."

"Sure," Walsh nodded. "When you're ready to leave town."

Ed was breathing heavily. His fists were clenched. "I don't like to be pushed around, Walsh. Some day you'll go too far."

The older man shrugged, then glanced over at Herndon. He said, "Put the mop down and come along with me, stranger."

Herndon put the mop back into the pail in the corner. His knees were shaking and his forehead was moist with perspiration. He collected the dollar change the bartender owed him, then headed for the door.

"You can call for your gun at my office, Ed," said the man with the star.

Ed managed a laugh. It had an ugly sound. He came towards Herndon and Herndon stopped.

"You're lucky, fella," Ed said flatly. "And if you want to stay lucky, keep out of my sight. I mean every damned word of that."

John Herndon made no answer. He walked on toward the door.

THE sun was high in the sky and outside it was almost unbearably hot. In the sheriff's office, however, a man could breathe and there was a lingering coolness from the night before. The sheriff explained that this was because of the earth floor and the two-foot thick adobe walls.

"It's not as bad living out here as you folks from the East might imagine," he insisted. "Why, I'd take this any day to a place in the city."

John Herndon wouldn't. He hated this town already. Hated everything about it. Even the food he had bought with the dollar change the bartender had given him hadn't been good.

"What you gonna do?" asked the sheriff.

Herndon had no answer for that. He didn't know what he was going to do. His wallet had been crammed with money but it had either been lost on the train or stolen from him before or after he had been thrown off. He had had a ticket to the west coast. The ticket was gone, too. A train would stop here tonight but he couldn't get on it without money or a ticket. And he couldn't stay here. The sheriff had made that clear.

"Ed Springer's a pretty bad hombre," the sheriff said. "And if there's any one thing he hates more than another, it's a man from the East. Last year we had a schoolmarm who was really something to look at. Ed took a fancy to her but she ran off with a dude who was staying at the Latham ranch. Since then,

Ed's declared a private war on anyone who comes here all dressed up in store clothes."

The sheriff sucked on his pipe. "Course if you were a doctor," he suggested, "why, you could go out to Bill Patterson's and look after his girl. Patterson's pretty well fixed. He might pay you enough to get a train ticket."

"But I'm not a doctor," Herndon said flatly. "Ain't you?"

Herndon scowled at the door. He wondered what impulse had made him bring that black bag along. He would never open it again. He knew that. He should never have brought it.

"You'd like that little girl of Bill Patterson's," the sheriff continued. "Sharp as a trick. Blue-eyed and hair as yellow as the sun. Some day she's gonna be a mighty purty woman. That is—if she gets well."

"Shut up," Herndon barked.

The sheriff blinked. "What you so touchy about, son? If you ain't a doctor you ain't a doctor. An' that's that."

John Herndon chewed at his lip. He got up and started walking back and forth across the room. "What's the matter with the doctor they've got?"

"Why nothing much, son, only they don't have a doctor. The only doctor in this part of the country got himself bit by a rattlesnake and died, more'n a month ago."

"What's wrong with the girl?"

The sheriff shrugged. "Don't know as I know. You wouldn't be interested, anyhow."

Herndon managed a short laugh. He told himself that he wasn't interested. Why should he be? He was through being a doctor. He was never going to take a temperature again. Never touch a scalpel.

"Where is this Bill Patterson?" he heard himself asking.

"Gone home, I suppose."

"And where's home?"

"Twenty—thirty miles off that way." The sheriff waved an arm vaguely toward the north.

"How would a man get there?"

"Horse."

John Herndon faced the window and stared out into the street. The town seemed deserted. Except for four horses hitched to the rail in front of the saloon there was no sign of life.

The sheriff cleared his throat. "I've gotta be riding north myself purty soon. Reckon I'll take the wagon. Want to go along? I could pick up your stuff at the station."

"Why not?" Herndon answered slowly. "I sure don't want to stay here. Let's get started."

THE road ran straight and over a flat and uninteresting country, marked here and there by small herds of cattle. John Herndon and the sheriff sat together on the high seat of the wagon. The sheriff didn't

have much to say. Now and then he shouted at the horses, stirring them by his voice to a greater effort. Once the sheriff remarked that this was a great country.

Herndon couldn't see anything great about it. But it was vast. There wasn't any question of that. New York City, Herndon decided, could be sprinkled out over this countryside and completely lost.

"Ed Springer lives over that way," the sheriff said suddenly, pointing to the west. "He's got a pretty fine ranch. Runs it for his old man who's all crippled up. He don't get along very well with Patterson but so far they haven't had any serious trouble."

A road branched off to the west but as far as Herndon could see there was no sign of any house.

"The Kents are east of here," the sheriff went on. "Silas Kent is a square-shooter. He's got a fine wife and his daughter is pretty as a picture. He's got a couple of fine sons, too. North of him are the Edwards and northeast is the Latham ranch."

Herndon scowled. "What in the world do they all do?"

The sheriff chuckled. "Why they raise things, son. They raise cattle and children and a little hell on Saturday nights when they all flock to town. Did you think folks out here were any different than where you came from?"

"Maybe they're not."

The sheriff dug out his pipe and lit it. He squinted at the sun. "Be cooler in an hour," he announced. "Be downright cold in two, but I've got some blankets in the wagon."

Herndon hadn't thought he would need a blanket but soon after dark he was glad to wrap one around his shoulders. A chilly wind had come up along toward dusk. It knifed through his clothes and set his teeth to chattering.

"We're almost there," said the sheriff. "That's it. That light up ahead."

The light didn't look so far off. Herndon shivered and pulled the blanket closer around him. He got to wondering what was wrong with the Patterson girl and what Bill Patterson would say when he showed up. After all, Bill Patterson, as well as Springer, had ordered him to get out of town.

Though the light hadn't seemed far away it was a long time before they reached the clustering buildings of the Patterson ranch. When the sheriff pulled up, Herndon climbed stiffly to the ground. He heard the door open and heard a man's voice asking who was there. "Just me and a friend of mine, Bill," answered the sheriff. "Got the coffee on?"

"Come right in, Tom," Patterson invited. "I'll have Fred take care of your team."

The sheriff reached back into the wagon and

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picked up Herndon's black bag. He climbed to the ground and started toward the open door where Bill Patterson waited. Herndon followed him.

"I brought the doc with me," the sheriff mentioned as he got closer. "How is she, Bill?"

The man in the doorway scowled. He looked straight at Herndon. "I thought you said you weren't a doctor," he growled.

John Herndon didn't know what kind of an answer to make. He could feel his face getting flushed.

A middle-aged woman appeared at Patterson's shoulder. She had stringy, gray hair and looked tired. Her voice was hushed. She said, "Come on in. Don't stand out there in the cold with the door open."

"Come on, doc," advised the sheriff.

Bill Patterson stepped back into the room and Herndon followed the sheriff inside. It was warm in the house. There was a stove in one corner of this living room. Near it was an open door and from the room beyond came the sound of a girl's crying.

"What's wrong with her?" Herndon heard himself asking.

"We don't know," Patterson answered. "Stomach ache, she says. She's all bloated. She—she ain't ever been sick before."

John Herndon crossed to the door and stared into the bedroom beyond. A girl in her early twenties was bending over the figure in the bed. The girl was rather attractive but Herndon was only vaguely aware of her. His eyes settled on the flushed face of the child. There was no perspiration on the child's forehead. Her eyes were closed but she was twisting her body from side to side, whimpering, crying.

Herndon moved on into the room. From the other side of the bed he touched the child's forehead, then he reached under the covers and felt her abdomen. It was hard as a rock. His face was grave as he straightened up.

The girl near the bed was staring at him wide-eyed. Herndon looked back toward the door. Bill Patterson and his wife had crowded into the room and the sheriff stood just behind them.

"What is it, doc?" asked the sheriff.

"How did it start?" Herndon asked. "What did she complain of? Do you remember?"

"Just a stomach ache," said Mrs. Patterson. "That was yesterday afternoon. I didn't pay much attention to it until night. She cried all night. She—is it serious, doctor?"

HERNDON lifted a hand to his face and was suddenly conscious of the way he must look. He hadn't shaved. His shirt was soiled and his clothing was terribly wrinkled. His eyes were probably bloodshot

and dark-circled. He wondered how these people could possibly have any faith in anything he might say.

"Well, doc?" asked the sheriff.

"It's appendicitis," Herndon replied. "I'll want hot water and soap. Bandages for sponging. To sterilize the bandages you can boil them in a pan. We'll have to use a table. I think the one in the living room will do. Pin a blanket on it and put a fresh sheet on top."

Bill Patterson moistened his lips. "What are you going to do?"

"Operate," Herndon answered.

"No, by God!" Patterson exploded. "No drunken bum is going to use a knife on my daughter. Get out of my house."

John Herndon looked the man straight in the eye. "Do you want your daughter to live?" he asked bluntly.

"You're not going to touch her!"

Mrs. Patterson laid a hand on her husband's arm. She said, "Please, Bill. She's just getting worse, there in bed. We don't know what's wrong. If there's a chance—" she turned away—"I'll start the water and get the bandages."

Herndon turned back to look at the child in the bed. He was terribly afraid the operation would be too late, that he would find the appendix ruptured. He knelt at the bedside and laid his hand again on the child's forehead.

"It's going to be all right, Elsa," whispered a voice at his shoulder. "It's going to be all right, now."

John Herndon glanced around. The girl who had been in the room when he came here smiled at him bravely. There were tears in her eyes. "God must have sent you," she breathed. "There's just no other explanation for it."

Herndon tried to swallow the lump that had jumped into his throat. *God and a bottle of whiskey*, he told himself. *God and a bottle of whiskey and something that had happened in a hospital operating room back in New York City.*

His thoughts suddenly called that whole scene back to his memory. He could see the table on which the woman was lying. He could follow the operation from beginning to end. He could see himself as clearly as though he had been only a spectator. He could see his hands. They had usually been as steady as a machine, but for no good reason on that night—

He shook his head, trying to drive the memory away, trying to blot out the accusing expression he had seen on the face of the man who had assisted him and on the face of the nurse.

"We got the table ready, doc," called the sheriff from the doorway. "The water's boiling. What do you want us to do?"

Herndon got to his feet and went into the

living room. He glanced at the table and at his bag, open on a chair near it. Bill Patterson came up and touched him on the shoulder. Patterson's eyes were cold and hard.

"I want to tell you something, doc," Patterson said slowly. "We think a heap of Elsa. She's just about all that matters to me and mom. If she dies, well, I reckon you'll die too. And I mean that, doc. Every word of it."

Herndon made no answer. He walked over to the table, stretched out his hands and looked at them and then dropped them quickly to his side so that he couldn't see how unsteady they were. He remembered what the sheriff had said about Elsa. Sharp as a trick, blue eyed, hair yellow as the sun. There were freckles on her nose, too. The sheriff hadn't mentioned those.

"Ready for her, doc?" asked the sheriff.

Herndon reached into his bag and started laying out the things he would need. He said, "Just a minute, Walsh. Give me another minute."

THE coffee pot simmered on the stove. In a chair near the window the sheriff dozed. Herndon sprawled in another chair, half across the room. Now and then he could hear the murmur of voices from the child's bedroom where Bill Patterson and his wife and the girl from the nearby ranch were waiting. It was beginning to grow light in the east. Soon the sun would be up.

Herndon went into the bedroom. He came back after a moment and nodded to the sheriff and smiled. "I think she'll be all right," he said slowly. "Of course, I ought to stay around for a day or so. That is—"

"You're damned right you'll stay around," said the sheriff. "Lay down on that sofa over there and get some sleep."

Herndon hesitated for a moment, then went to the sofa and lay down. After all, he decided, a few minutes rest wouldn't hurt him at all. . . .

It was long past noon when he awoke and after he had washed up he went into the child's room. Mrs. Patterson was there, dozing in a rocker. Elsa was awake. She looked pale and tired but she smiled at Herndon and asked him who he was.

"Just a doctor," Herndon answered. "Suppose I look at that funny stomach of yours."

He turned back the covers, examined the dressing and then changed it. The incision looked normal. A faint grin came to Herndon's lips. He said, "Not bad, Elsa. Not bad at all. We got to you just in time. We cut out all the meanness in you."

"All of it?" Elsa asked. "Can't I ever get mad any more?"

Herndon chuckled. He glanced at Mrs. Patterson who was watching him, and winked. He said, "Nope, all the meanness is gone."

THE sound of voices reached in from the yard. Herndon went to the living room and looked through the window. Ed Springer had just ridden up and had dismounted and was talking to Bill Patterson. Herndon scowled. He started for the door. "No, doctor," called Mrs. Patterson. "You're not to go out there. When you're ready to leave, Bill will take you to Crescent City to take the train. You're to—"

John Herndon shook his head, went on.

Herndon stopped a few paces away from the two men. He looked straight at Springer. "I left that town," he said bluntly, "but I had to. Soon as I'm through here I'm going back. And I'm going to stay there as long as I want to. Maybe forever. What are you going to do about it?"

Ed Springer blinked. He didn't get flushed and angry as Herndon had thought he would. Instead, he suddenly started laughing. Then he looked over at Bill Patterson and said, "Hell, Bill. I guess I sure had this hombre figured wrong. Why he's so tough you'd almost think he grew up here."

Herndon didn't get it. He stared at the man curiously.

"Look here," Springer said, abruptly quite serious. "I meant that. I was wrong. Far as I'm concerned, this part of the country's your home from now on. I reckon I like Bill's kid about as much as he does. Will you shake on it, doc?"

Still a little amazed, John Herndon shook the man's hand.

"I got a bottle out in the barn," said Bill Patterson. "How about a drink?"

Herndon shook his head, then changed his mind. He couldn't run away from that, either. He said, "One drink, Bill. That's all. If I want more, just remind me of Elsa and last night."

Bill Patterson nodded. He said, "Doc, do you mean that, about staying here? We'd sure appreciate it if you did."

"Well, I'll think it over," Herndon promised. "That is, I'll stay around for a while, anyhow."

Yes, that was it, Herndon decided as they walked toward the barn. He would stay around here for a while. Maybe he would come to like it enough to stay always, or maybe he would want to go back East. It really didn't make much difference where a man lived. It was the way a man faced things that counted.

In the barn Patterson poured the drinks. "To you, doc," he said, lifting his glass.

"To a long life and a happy one," said Ed Springer.

John Herndon grinned. He said, "No, let's drink to—say, what part of the country is this, anyhow?"



By
**TOM
W.**

BLACKBURN

The woman sat astride a barebacked, grubby mountain pony. . . .

LAWMAN FROM HELL

One final chore remained for Casey Drummond's lightning sixes after they'd tamed their last helltown—to buy life for his son with the blood of an innocent man!

TOWARD midday Casey Drummond was well back into the ragged mountains above Frio Valley. He was riding steadily, his eyes in a perpetual squint, automatically searching for what sign he could pick up as he rode. The higher air was clean, with a sharp taste and there was an edged promise of the brisk chill into which he would presently ride as he came up just under timberline.

He was astride a good horse. His gun lay snug against his thigh. He had letters of authority and instruction in his pocket. He

was done for a brief time with following furrows and the bitter slowness with which a man grubbed even a living from tilled land. He had turned the clock back to the good years. He should have been riding with high spirits, but he was not. His mind kept turning back to little Danny and to Mary and the quarrel he'd had with her.

Life was a pretty ragged deal to Casey Drummond. Not that it had been in the beginning. In the beginning things had all been good. He'd gotten a young start and he'd stayed steady and by the time he'd met Mary

and married her he was the most successful and respected law officer in the state. He had good money coming in and a wife and the years were bright ahead. Little Danny was all that was needed. When he came, life was full.

Then, a bad night in a new town—he'd been hit by a ricocheting bullet. There was irony in that. The gent who tagged him had had a full, clean shot, but he had known he was shooting at Casey Drummond and the knowledge rattled him. His slug went wide, hit the stone facing of a building, and nearly spent, struck Casey on one temple.

There was a week Casey didn't remember, a week in which Mary went about white-faced and silent, minding her baby and making prayers only she knew. Casey came out of it, but he was done. He was blind. Money dribbled away. The blindness faded some. A grateful township deeded a section to the marshal who had cleaned its streets. Friends put up a house. Casey moved his family into it and bought a plow.

He was a big man and he worked hard, but there was bitterness in him. He had planned fancy schools for Danny and a big house and help for Mary. He had planned that, but now he worked endless hours to see food on the table and oil in the lamps. He wanted to go back to his embroidered boots and tailored shirts with the hang of a gun at his hip and the knowledge that he was the law, responsible for the peace in which his neighbors lived. He wanted to go back, but he couldn't. A man with dim vision was fair game for the first drifter along the outlaw trail—as long as he wore a badge.

The first year on the farm had been a private hell for Casey Drummond, but Mary's spirits remained unchanged. She seemed grateful the three of them could be together and she kept the little house on the gift section as neatly as though it was a big place in town. Danny grew and learned to talk and Casey was almost to where he could hold the bitterness down. . . .

Then Danny was hurt.

MARY was milking. The cow, crotchety and fly-nervous, dumped the bucket. Danny had been watching. The sudden clatter startled him. He scuttled into the next stall, under the hoofs of a bad horse Casey had been trying to sell. That had been what—eight days ago?

It seemed forever.

Doctors had come. There was a pressure on Danny's brain, they said. Danny wouldn't die, but he couldn't move, either. Somehow, to Casey the paralysis seemed more terrible than death. What could be done? Anything?

The doctors weren't sure. Time might ease

the pressure, with no other treatment. The paralysis might fade as swiftly as it had come. It might be permanent. But if the boy could be gotten to a certain hospital in St. Louis, soon, a man there could perform a delicate operation which would ease the pressure immediately.

The doctors got together in a corner and looked at Mary and looked at Casey and Casey knew one of them was telling the others about the glancing bullet which had made a farmer of him. They talked a while, then one of them cornered Casey and said that the St. Louis man who could perform the operation would likely waive a portion of his good-sized fee under the—ah—circumstances.

"How much?" Casey wanted to know tightly. "How much will it cost?"

"Only five hundred in your case, Drummond," the doctor said kindly.

Five hundred—only five hundred!

When the doctors were gone Casey caught Mary's shoulders in a fierce grip. "We haven't got five hundred!" he said with harsh desperation. "We haven't got one hundred. And there's no place to get it!"

Mary nodded wearily and turned a gentle smile up at him.

"I know, Casey," she said. "We can't send Danny to St. Louis. We'll just have to wait and hope. Remember the doctors said that maybe time—"

Casey knew what she meant. Mary was afraid that he'd hold himself responsible because he couldn't turn up money against this need. She was afraid he would blame himself and she was trying to save him that. It was like Mary to step out of her own grief to ease his. But Casey couldn't look at Danny, helpless in his bed. He couldn't stand the house. He couldn't stand Mary's gentleness with him most of all. He stormed out the door.

He was gone that day and the night which followed and half of the next day. He came back whipped and beaten. He had telegraphed peace officers in three towns he had tamed down in the old days. He had begged friends for work, but there wasn't any. And the towns who remembered him also remembered he could no longer see a clean target beyond fifty feet and they sent only regrets. Casey Drummond had not been born a humble man. This helplessness was a hard thing to swallow.

Then, when desperation had turned him savage and there was no outlet for his restlessness, a letter had come from the Frio Valley Rancher's Association. They had heard, the letter said, that Casey Drummond was looking for a chore. They had one. An outlaw had holed up in the mountains above the valley, an outlaw known as the Timberline Kid. Most of the ranchers in the association had been losing nuisance amounts of beef for some time.

They were fed up with it, but every attempt to get at this outlaw had failed. He was a hard, quick kind and they wanted him thinned out of the hills. The fee, considering Casey Drummond's reputation, would be five hundred dollars for this job.

That letter brought the sun. It was the answer to everything. Casey was in a singing mood. It was then that he quarreled with Mary.

"Look it in the face, Casey," she said somberly. "You shouldn't make me be the one to tell you this. You should see it for yourself. You can't trail a man like that into his own hills. Not for five thousand dollars. You can't do the things you used to. Your eyes aren't a handicap here, but you wouldn't have a chance in the mountains with them!"

"If I was stone blind I could flush a two-bit cattle rustler out of some hills!" Casey snapped back. Mary shook her head.

"Look at it this way then, Casey," she argued gently. "Danny's hurt has made me as reckless as you are. The only thing is, I have to do Danny's thinking, too. He's too small to do it himself. I have to think that if you went out on this job, you might bring back the money needed to send him to St. Louis, but you might not come back, too. It's a terrible thing for a baby to be paralyzed, Casey, but it's worse to have him left without a father. You can't go!"

"There's nothing I can't do, Mary Drummond!" Casey said harshly. "And I aim to show you!"

CASEY had felt sure of himself, flinging out of the house and saddling his one good trail horse. He had felt sure he was right. He hated to leave Mary like that, but he couldn't stand another hour in the little house, looking at Danny's body, motionless under the blankets. Besides, it seemed when he thought of it that he'd gotten so he could see pretty well of late. And hell, he was just over the thirty mark. He was young and quick on his feet and he knew the game backwards. Maybe against a hard crew he'd have thought twice. But against one damned young fool holed up in the hills, bidding for some kind of glory with a few stolen cattle and a name like the Timberline Kid—

However, some of the sureness faded when he talked to the representative of the ranchers at Frio. The man looked him over pretty coldly.

"I've heard you ran to bad luck, Drummond. You've been out of the game a spell. Maybe you're out for good, it's been said. But right now you're in a jam. It's been my experience a man in a tight'll do a better job than one plain for hire. We've got nothing hands-down on this boy in the hills. He's in our fur, that's

all. You'll have to do your own trapping and you'll have to get him cold to make it stick. We want his hair or proof that'll jail him. We don't pay off for less. And he's so cagey we don't want to send our own men after him. Still want a try?"

Drummond gathered that the Frio ranchers were a pretty cold bunch, all hard business, and that their yelping about this Timberline Kid was more a matter of pride than anything else. This was the kind of a job he would have turned down cold in the old days. The law, the way he saw it, was to give protection to folks who were being hurt one way or another. And he didn't think the Frio crowd was bad hurt. However, there was only one answer. He needed the five hundred as he'd never needed anything in his life. He took the job and rode toward the hills.

Now, after a day in the tall slopes, he was a lot less sure than he had been at Frio. They'd given him directions to reach the series of upper valleys where the Timberline Kid apparently hung out, and they'd warned him again that a couple of hunts they'd staged themselves had spilled a little blood on their saddles.

Casey had hunted lone wolves before. He knew where to look for the little tell-tale signs, a man working alone invariably left—a string gate down that he intended to hang up the next time he rode the same way, the embers and ash of a noon fire not entirely kicked under cover, tracks heavier on the shady side of a trail because a single man has room to keep out of the sun, there were many things. But he couldn't find a one in these upper valleys.

It bothered him deeply. He was a long way from being on the road home with his fee from the Frio ranchers so he wasn't admitting it, but he wondered if maybe the little signs he needed were there, all right, but that he was missing them because of his eyes.

There was another thing that bothered him. He had worked high country before. Contrary to a hunter's usual system, he had always worked the bottoms, riding in the deep notches on the valleys and looking upward. He had long ago discovered that a man's inclination was to head for the high places, whether hunter or hunted, and a man appearing on a high ridge or saddle or summit made a silhouette visible a long way from below. However, distant ridges were gray blurs to him, now. Clouds might as well be down on the peaks about him. Any army could appear on them and he'd miss them.

He was, he reckoned, a fool. He had taken a risk and a long ride and quarreled with Mary—all for a fool's stubborn idea.

When the sun was directly overhead, Casey stopped and chewed disinterestedly at the lunch in a saddle pocket. He had one chance, he figured now, of cutting the Timberline Kid's

trail. If the Kid had a headquarters, a shack or cabin or cave or something from which he worked, there was a chance he might find that. But if the Kid was strictly wild, living in his saddle, Casey knew he'd either get a bullet through him when he wasn't looking for it or he'd miss the Kid entirely. When a man has to scowl to see the markings on a moving horse at fifty yards. . . .

As the sun swung past the zenith, Casey rose to leather and lined on against the slopes ahead. Half an hour later he tipped through a saddle into another swale-like valley higher than the one he had just quitted. The air was more sharp, here. Snow couldn't be too far above, on up the mountain. He saw a pattern against the gray granite of the upper peaks but he couldn't tell if it was snow, cloud, or lighter rock. He swore to himself and kept his eyes close at hand on the trail. As usual, it told him nothing. The Timberline Kid left few marks. Casey swore again, then hauled his horse to a sudden halt. His head tipped back a little. His nostrils flared. He grinned. To hell with his eyes! He didn't need them, now.

THE faint, unmistakable smell of a pine wood fire was on the wind and the wind was in his face. He jogged his horse ahead. The little valley slanted upward, run-

ning into a sort of miniature box canyon against the gray rock scarp of the upper peaks. Tracking the smoke on the air as surely as he ever tracked prints in dust, Casey rode toward the box canyon. And as he rode, a mounting tension built in him.

This was wild and open country. It was higher than most men liked to live. Aside from a little small game, there wasn't anything on which a man could live this high. It wasn't likely there'd be anybody else in this valley. The certainty built up that he was tracking straight toward the Timberline Kid and Casey remembered again the Frio man's blunt statement that the Kid had shot a man or two from leather for crowding him too close.

It began to bother him.

Casey freed his rifle in its scabbard and leaned a little forward, squinting his eyes painfully, in an effort to screen out as much of the fuzz surrounding distant objects as he could. It was too much to hope to see the Timberline Kid first. It would be enough to see him in time to guess what he was going to do. It would be enough somehow to get a peace sign across to him and then work close enough to talk. Casey figured if he could talk to the Kid he could make him see sense. Or if that wouldn't work, maybe trick him a little and get the drop on him when the time was right.

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Either would do. But he had to get close first.

There was a stand of young timber in the box canyon. Casey watched its edge anxiously. If a man was holed up beyond it, then he'd be lying in its cover, watching for intruders. Casey watched anxiously and rode carefully. He cut the distance to the trees from a thousand yards to a hundred and could see every sapling trunk without the fuzz and nothing happened. He rode on, expecting a hail or a shot at every yard. None came. He rode into the trees, thinking maybe the Kid was especially cautious and wouldn't shoot a man in the open for fear of being seen by someone else. He rode into the trees, certain that the challenge would come here.

There was, however, only the rustle of his own passage. The timber patch was small. He broke suddenly out of it and stared across a green meadow toward a low cabin built almost under the standing wall of the box canyon. He couldn't make out detail at the distance. It was a pretty rude cabin, he thought, the kind a man alone in these rugged hills would pile up to keep the weather off. It had a chimney and Casey knew the fire he had smelled was on the hearth within.

This was all good. This was what he had wanted. This had to be the Timberline Kid's hangout. There was only one rub. Where was the Timberline Kid—not waiting in the cabin like a woman expecting the preacher to call, that was certain!

Half across the meadow Casey was so busy staring at the cabin that he let his reins slack and his horse stopped to pull at the thick grass underfoot. Casey jerked the animal's head up impatiently and would have gipped it on but a voice spoke quietly off to one side.

"Leave him be, mister," the voice counseled. "Reckon this is about as close as you'd better come to the house, anyways! Who are you?"

Casey's head swiveled. A woman sat astride a barebacked grubby mountain pony. His first impression was that she was old, then he saw this was not true. She was dressed in shabby clothes, but they were painfully clean. She was young and there was a bright and vivid beauty in her, but it was filmed over with a scoring of deep trouble which gave the illusion of age.

The woman held a big Remington Frontier in her hand. Squinting, Casey saw the long ear of the hammer was set back, ready to fire.

"What's your business?" the woman wanted to know. Then, before Casey could answer, she went on. "A rock man, maybe? There was one up this way last spring from Denver—"

A rock man—Casey got that. They'd got a big school at Denver now—a university of some sort—and come summer teachers out of it were drifting through the hills, looking for one thing and another. There was one claimed

to be a seed breeder that had stopped at the farm for a couple of days soon after Mary and himself had got their house up. Sort of a big gent, but peculiar, going around peering at this and that and shaking his head and writing in a little book.

Casey Drummond grinned slightly. There were men dead and gone that would turn over in their graves to know Casey had been mistaken for a professor. Maybe it was the squint that did it. Casey eased back in his saddle. It had never been his practice to travel under any iron but his own. If this place belonged to the Timberline Kid, this woman was going to find out who he was sooner or later. The beginning was a good place to start. Casey opened his mouth to speak his name and business, but the words did not come. Something kept him from it. Instead, he nodded in a kind of uncertain way. The woman eased visibly.

"We don't cotton to visitors up this way, usually," she said. She stopped and looked long at Casey. A kind of reckless desperation flared up in her eyes. "But maybe you'll do. Maybe you'll do. Look, do you know anything about anything else but rocks?"

Casey didn't get a chance to answer this, either. The woman rushed on, "Can you set a leg that's broken badly?"

There was a thin, wild hope in her voice and Casey realized she was close to collapse, holding herself steady and upright with the ragged end of a taxed will. He would have lied to a saint. He nodded.

The woman commenced to sob, then.

"Oh, thank God!" she cried out. "Come on, quick! He just lays there and tries to grin at me whenever I come in and makes as though he'll be getting up tomorrow and all the while he's dying. He's lying there with hurt burning him up and he don't say anything. I can't stand it!"

SHE wheeled her shaggy pony. Casey gipped his own mount forward. The woman flung down before the door of the cabin. Casey followed her inside. The place was neat. Bleached flour sacking had been caught up into some kind of ruffled curtain at the windows. The floor was poor timber, poorly laid, but it was scrubbed clean. And there was a stiff clean look to the bedding on the wide bunk in the corner.

A man was on the bunk. He half raised up, trying to reach a carbine hooked on the wall above him, when Casey came in the door. His reach was a foot short and Casey could see the film of sweat that small effort cost the man.

"Cory!" the woman cried sharply. "He's just another rock-hunter and he's got some knowledge of doctoring. You lie quiet!"

The word "doctoring" seemed to work a magic on the sick man. He caved back on the

bed. Casey crossed slowly and stared down at the face on the pillow. Agony had etched it into a horrible mask. Casey hooked the blanket and threw it back. One of the man's legs lay on a crude kind of cradle. The woman spoke softly.

"He fell with a horse near three weeks ago. I got him to bed and it seemed he was doing good. Then there was a touch of trouble—"

The man cut in, his weak voice acrid with bitterness.

"Trouble, hell!" he snarled. "Those fat-bellied devils in the Frio rode up for another try at driving me out. I got ahorseback and met 'em down canyon. There's no Frio man going to set eyes on this cabin till I'm dead!"

"That won't be long unless you lay quiet!" Casey said.

He spoke more to cover his elation than to advise the sick man. Here was his five hundred dollars. Here was Danny's trip to St. Louis. Here was the thing Mary had said could not be done. And it was made all easy and simple as though Providence had stepped in to side a lawman who could no longer see the ridgetops. The Timberline Kid was no menace, now.

The woman caught her breath at his words. Casey swung toward her. She seemed to be sagging at every joint. Her eyes lay in hollows so deep a man could not make out the color of the irises. Casey saw that she was in more desperate need of help than the man. He touched her shoulder.

"Ma'am, how long's it been since you've slept?"

The woman wiped a hand wearily across her lined face. She shrugged.

"Lying down?" she asked wryly. "I don't know. A week, maybe—"

"Mister," the man on the bunk said earnestly, "if you could do something for Nalda—"

Casey straightened and steered the woman to a wide, home-made settee which looked like it had a comfortable pad. He pushed her down on it, lifted her feet up, and pulled the ragged

boots from them. There was a shelf in the corner with blankets on it. He took one down, shook it out across the woman, and turned to the stove. He was busy there, sparking up a hot little fire and getting water on to boil and finding tea. When he had a pot ready, he came back to find the woman with her eyes closed, limp as a rag and sleeping heavily.

"Mister," the man on the bunk said softly, "I'm owing you—"

Casey had a bottle in his saddlebags. He brought it in, poured a mug half full of tea, sugared it, and filled the rest with whiskey. He gave it to the man.

"It'll be a rough road," he said.

The man made no answer and sucked the scalding drink down. Casey poured another. There was a small barrel in the center of the room with its top painted and a flounce sewed around it and it served for a lamp table. Casey put the lamp on the eating table and took the flounce off and carried the barrel outside to kick it to pieces.

He came back in with a couple of smooth staves and brought the pot of steaming water over by the bunk and found some folded, brightly clean flour sacking on the blanket shelf and he opened his knife.

The bone in the injured leg had been broken between the knee and the ankle joint. It had not been compound—the bone ends had not penetrated the flesh in the beginning. But the ride down canyon the Timberline Kid had made against the ranchers from the Frio had been bad business. The fracture had broken loose again. The ends still had not torn through the flesh, but they had done internal damage under the surface. The leg was badly swollen and blue with infection.

Casey found a stone in a drawer, whetted his knife, and cut savagely into the center of the infection. He cut deeply and fast. The wound drained, but the thing he had feared happened, too. In his effort to get at the root of the infection, he had severed a blood vessel in healthy tissue beneath. Blood came strong-



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ly and he could not check it for a time.

The man on the bunk watched him work in silence, making no outcry against the sharp, wrenching agony of Casey's crude lancing. He asked no question at the blood, nor when Casey rose and crossed to the stove. His lips compressed a little when Casey came back with the blade of his knife glowing cherry red and thrust it deep, searing across the source of the blood.

He cried out once when Casey put the full power of his big frame into the straightening pull which matched the broken ends of the bone in the red and angry leg. He watched in silence again while Casey set the barrel staves, swathed in flour sacking, along the broken member and bound them tightly to it.

The man should have slept, then, but he did not. He commenced to talk. Casey would have stopped him, but the man seemed eased by it and the white, tight lines ran slowly from his face. He talked for half an hour, a sort of monotone in which there was little complaint, yet it was a damning story.

When sleep finally rushed over the weary face and good color began supplanting the flush of fever, Casey sagged into a chair and looked at the two sleeping figures across the room from each other—the man and the woman. He looked at them and thought hard.

The Timberline Kid's name was Cory Manning. Three years before, he had been top rider for the biggest outfit in the Frio. The woman, Nalda, had been a percentage girl in a Frio saloon. Manning had married her and brought her onto the ranch. His boss, riding a high horse and making big talk about Nalda's kind of woman, had refused to let her come onto the place. A scandal, the big rancher had yelled, and he'd gotten his face punched for it. But Manning had had to get off the place with his bride.

He'd tried a couple of other spreads and gotten the same treatment. The Frio bunch were a stiff-necked lot. Manning's dander had come up. The ranchers had ordered him out of the valley, but he'd been damned if he'd go. He'd brought his bride up the slopes to this high little swale heading this canyon. They'd built this cabin, doing the work themselves. They'd put in a garden plot and Manning had ridden himself to callouses, running down maverick strays in the high country, strays so thoroughly lost the ranchers below wouldn't send a crew after them.

He'd built a little herd and sold a few head and they'd got along. But every time he met a Frio rancher or rider, he was prodded. Bitter, he didn't step sideways to avoid trouble, but he didn't hunt it. Toward the end of the second season, he knew Nalda was going to have a baby. He was scared. The fear had been still in his face when he told Casey about it. He

waited out the time in a sweat, and when there was need, he rode to Frio for a doctor.

His old boss and half a dozen riders were in town. They cornered him. He tried to tell them his errand and step around them, but they'd been drinking and figured now was high time to run the nester they didn't want out of the hills above them. He'd put holes in two of them and broken the head of a third and got to the doctor's office, all right. But the doc wasn't there and nobody'd tell him where the medico was.

Desperate, Manning had hit back for the hills. The baby had been born when he got there. It had died and Nalda was sliding fast. Even thinking about it, now Casey sweated with the man's desperate agony that night. It was not hard to understand why the Frio men were marked when they rode the high hills.

AT SUNSET Casey went out into the yard for a smoke. There was a big sugar pine behind the cabin. At its base was a stone marker. Someone had cut lettering carefully into it.

Cory Manning, Jr.
B. 1892—D. 1892

Danny, at least, was not dead. Casey went back into the house. The woman was still asleep but the man was awake.

"After me spilling my guts you're bound to think I'm a howler," Cory Manning said quietly. "I don't want you to think I'm a fool and ungrateful, too. I ran pretty wild for a spell when I was a kid—wild enough to have a lot of respect for a gent named Casey Drummond and smart enough to come pretty close to guessing at his face when I see it. Gossip drifts even this high. We've heard about Drummond's eyes and even his kid, sick at home. Casey Drummond wouldn't ride this way unless there was money in it for him and he had a chore to do. Way you've strapped this leg up, I'll be able to travel in ten days or so. You skin back to Frio and make your claim. They can come after me when they've a mind."

Drummond looked at the man. He looked at the man's face. It had a strong wild cut all right, showing plainly still under the pallor of his hurt and his sickness. But there was a square jaw and a wide, easy mouth and there were lines at the eyes which were made by laughing. Drummond knew the faces along the outlaw trail. They were not faces like this. They were hard and thin-lipped and narrow of nose and the mouths were ugly. He rounded his eyes at Manning, as though in surprise.

"Drummond?" he said in puzzlement. "Drummond? Man, you should be quiet!

(Continued on page 126)

THE PILGRIM OF SCALP-TOWN GULCH

By AL STORM



Another terrific blast shook the wash—then Benedict's gun began slamming out. . . .

●

He came to Fletcher's Gulch unbidden; he stayed on unasked. But he proved himself with blood and flame—to a town that was willing to die!

●

THERE was a faint stir of movement north, where Wolf Nose reared bleakly into the pale yellow blaze of afternoon sky. A dark figure showed momentarily in the ocatillo and yucca. An arm waved. Then the figure dropped from sight, but watching eyes had caught the signal and word swept from adobe to adobe until all of Fletcher's Gulch knew that Jactino, wily Dragoon-Chiricahua Apache, had again eluded the Sixth cavalry.

The stranger stepped to the narrow window slots of Juan Socorro's Cantina and watched the cavalcade of Fletcher's Gulch volunteers wind from the mesquite-choked canyons. Floppy tweed covered the strong sweep of his shoulders, the depth of his chest. His lean face was smooth-shaven, but there was something

in his eyes and the cant of his head that belied the pilgrim marking. Ignoring the sneering contempt of the half-dozen renegades behind him, the stranger keenly appraised the approaching dust cloud, noting the jaded men slumped heavily in their kacks, the drooping heads, the listless flopping of strengthless arms. Then he glanced long and searchingly at the yellow rock badlands of the Whetstones.

One by one the bone-weary civilian Indian fighters left the column as they came down the street. Someone in the cantina made jeering comment and they all laughed. The stranger turned slowly, blue eyes guardedly studying the crew of gun-heavy, swaggering border toughs. There was a joke he couldn't understand. It was almost as though they were elated by the Apache's escape and, pondering this observation, the tall stranger became even more withdrawn and reserved.

Four volunteers swung down before the cantina, teetering for a moment on fatigue-numbed legs, the weariness visibly pulling at them like a quicksand, sucking all strength and life away. Then the door was shoved open and the four scuffed in to sag wearily against the bar. All were dust-white, red of eye—pinched lips betraying their fight against sleep.

Fat Juan Socorro shoved out a bottle and the four drank deeply. Two of the men rolled smokes, a third rubbed grit from a black plug and gnawed at it. The fourth man hung his back over the bar, braced himself with his elbows, and let his blood-shot eyes move carefully from man to man until he had studied every person in the tiny saloon.

THE renegade crew had grown quiet with entry of the Indian fighters and now, under the sober, steady scrutiny, they became uneasy and sullen.

"Jactino got away, eh, Hank?" a hawk-nosed, black-browed dandy taunted. His shirt was of green silk, the rattlesnake skin hat-band spotless and new, and he showed brilliant white teeth as he grinned. But a cold beady film covered his eyes, giving them a metallic chill that never wavered nor warmed. "The Army can't catch him, Fletcher's Gulch can't do it, and Jactino still runs free through the Whetstones."

All four Fletcher's Gulch men fastened on the smirking gunny with hate-sharpened eyes.

"Jactino was makin' tracks afore we got started!" the thick-shouldered one rasped. "Like the last time—'nd the time afore that—some sneakin' polecat sent up smoke 'nd Jactino run!" The Indian fighter was raw with fatigue and the savage, goading sense of having been cheated. He fastened cold, red-rimmed eyes on the outlaw. "Maybe you know about that, Beldare?"

Beldare grinned mockingly and stood on

spread legs, his tumbs hooked lightly on the top edge of a wide, ornate cartridge belt. As the silence grew heavier, the other renegades ranged themselves behind their smirking leader. Then Beldare was no longer grinning and the cantina grew quiet and charged with tension. And the stranger knew that this trouble was deep-seated and of long standing.

"Stranger," the Indian fighter muttered slowly. "Ye'd better sidle over ag'in the far wall." He had slipped down off the bar, his dusty coat unbuttoned to show a heavy pistol hung close to his hand. The tobacco-chewer moved steadily across the room, took a stand near a window. None of the other three Fletcher's Gulch fighters had moved.

The stranger nodded and picked up his glass with steady fingers. "It's none of my business, of course," he mused casually. "But why should a white man aid an Apache?"

"As long as the Apaches run loose the Army is too busy to tend to penny-ante killers and outlaws," a man answered tersely. "They's cattle rustler's 'nd border runners who ain't keen on seein' the Army put order into this country."

Beldare whitened, his beak nose showing sharp and bold against the drawn lines of his face. He was hard hit and bitterly enraged by the blunt talk. But the Indian fighter wasn't backing down. His leathery brown face was set and emotionless as a stone mask.

The stranger eyed them both. Then he stepped into the rift, his drawling tones casual and untouched by any awareness of the pending violence.

"My name is Maurice Summers. My brother, William Summers, was last seen in the vicinity of Fletcher's Gulch. I'm here looking for him."

Beldare stiffened and turned a quick glance at the stranger. He looked again at the Indian fighters but some of the eager belligerence had drained from him.

"Summers—Bill Summers. Say—warn't that English remittance man called Summers? That tall, skinny dude as was always pikin' off to paint pictures?"

Maurice Summers turned toward the dust-caked Fletcher's Gulch volunteer. "That sounds like William."

"He's probably dead—sorry," the Indian fighter said brusquely. "Jactino's been out twice since the picture painter was last seen hereabouts, 'nd they're men ridin' the Whetstones as would slit his throat for half a bottle o' Mescal." The other's eyes moved pointedly toward Beldare's crew. "Sorry, son, but I reckon you're too late. My name's Hank Benedict."

Not a muscle had changed in the stranger's countenance as he heard the bad news. He nodded briefly and started toward the door.

Then he stopped.

"Too bad," he said slowly. "William fell heir to a quite sizeable fortune. I brought him a portion—gold, you know—blasted heavy but no question about its value wherever William wanted to spend it." Shaking his head, the stranger again turned toward the door.

"Wait, stranger!" Beldare stepped along the bar and faced Summers. "No sense goin' off half-cocked. Maybe your brother ain't dead." Hank glared and for a moment Beldare hesitated. Then he said, "Seems I seen some hombre makin' paint pictures back in the Whets less'n a week ago."

"Get out o' here, Beldare!"

Touched by the utter ferocity of the low command, both men turned quickly. Hank stood facing them, a cocked revolver menacingly steady in his big fist. Behind Hank, his three friends held Beldare's renegades at bay.

"I'd like to hear Mr. Beldare, Mr. Hank," the stranger said coldly. "I'll take it kindly if you'll allow him to speak."

"Get out, Beldare!" Hank snarled. "Like all of us, ye was plumb certain Bill Summers was dead till ye got wind o' this pilgrim's gold. But ye ain't fleecin' him in Fletcher's Gulch. Get that! Ye ain't! Now get out afore I blow yore guts all over the wall!"

Maurice Summers stiffened, but Hank's rage was a burning fury that made his face dark and ugly. One tiny move would set the heavy pistol into deadly roaring. Summers stepped back and allowed Beldare to lead his snarling wolf pack out into the street. Hank followed to the door.

Beldare reined in his prancing bay mare and looked at the volunteer Indian fighter with eyes made livid by his fury.

"We'll get this squared, Hank Benedict," he promised grimly. "We'll get this squared."

Hank Benedict shrugged and then turned back into the cantina. "Sorry, stranger," he apologized. "But that curly wolf'd skin ye outa yore eye-teeth."

Maurice Summers didn't answer. As he turned away anger was making a bright hard shine in his eyes.

A SCATTERING of Fletcher's Gulch townsmen watched Beldare lead his outlaw crew along the street and out towards the wilds of the mountain country. Most of those watching townsmen carried rifles, all had pistols, and Beldare could show his defiance only by riding slowly erect in his saddle, contempt open and daring on his face.

Watching the men leave, the stranger was tempted to call out. Then he compressed his lips. Fletcher's Gulch was tense and ragged-nerved from incessant apprehensive guard against marauding Apaches. He would gain nothing by rubbing against the town's opin-

ions. Filling a worn and black pipe, Summers probed the memory of Hank Benedict's brush with Beldare, recalling the eagerness of each man to kill the other, and then Summers pondered the reactions to his own announcement about his brother's share of gold. But thought of Hank Benedict's pistol brought anger again, and Maurice Summers thumbed out his pipe and sauntered along Fletcher's Gulch with avid curiosity.

The sun drifted towards the west, filling the valley with shadow. Deep purple rolled like low-hanging smoke across the gray-lipped Whetstones, split and shattered by the sun-flamed spires and stone crags still beautiful in the day's last color. Then the shadows began creeping in, and the evening chill, and the hushed unease of a frontier town besieged and threatened by the Apaches.

A horseman trotted up the street, saw the stranger. He drew rein. "Evenin'," the man said. "Don't go saunterin' around the edge o' town arter dark. Jactino's still loose, 'nd it ain't safe to be alone." With that terse warning the horseman was again trotting up the street.

Touched by the grim resignation of the man's tones, Summers watched until the gloom closed him in. Then he turned his steps towards the smells of savory cooking. As he came into the meager reaches of lantern light, he saw eight men talking to Hank Benedict. All were conspicuously barren of arms, and Summers watched as they shook hands with Benedict and then drifted away.

"Guards," Benedict explained gruffly. "They light a blaze if they want to warn Fletcher's Gulch. If they're 'bushed—well, Jactino won't get no arms or ammunition from their bodies."

Summers turned inside to eat and found that Hank Benedict was dogging his footsteps. "Sorry about yore brother," Benedict muttered, as though his mind were uneasy.

Summers made no comment and the Fletcher's Gulch man changed the subject. They ate at the counter, sitting side by side, with a strange unnamed uneasiness between them.

"You know this country?" Maurice Summers asked finally.

Hank Benedict nodded. "Like the palm o' my hand."

"Then who owns that little rock house I saw in a little canyon about a mile north and east of here? Nothing there but a little rock house in a big patch of boulders."

Hank Benedict thought for a moment, his thick brows drawn low and straight across his face. "Dutch Malone's place," he decided finally. "Dutch was killed by 'Paches two-three years back. Never knowed why he built there in the first place. Nothin' but boulders 'nd sand. . . ."

"Could I rent it?"

Benedict shot a quick glance at the stranger, then took a long time stirring his coffee. "Ye could have it," he said. "But they ain't no color within a dozen miles o' there if'n ye want to prospect. 'nd a man'd be invitin' Pache trouble by roostin' way out there by his lonesome." Benedict shook his head. "Course, I don't know what you want—"

Maurice Summers stood up. "Thanks, Benedict." He walked out into the night, feeling the Indian fighter's gaze following him with hard, suspicious speculation.

THE night was dark, with a great sprinkling of stars gleaming high and distant. For a moment Summers stood, drinking in the cool wind and the infinite silence. A hand touched his arm, and Summers leaped aside, whirling with a speed and lithe-ness that was oddly at variance with his usual calm reserve.

"Easy, stranger," Beldare grinned, his cold eyes questioning the stranger's lightning reaction.

Slowly Maurice Summers let his hand slide back into view. Beldare jerked his head toward the black hulk of a deserted adobe hut. Summers followed warily, his eyes flicking through the dark. Then Beldare paused and rolled a smoke which he was careful not to light.

"About yore brother Bill," Beldare husked softly. "I know where he is—'nd he's alive. Fact is, Bill 'nd me're kinda pals." A coyote howled eerily far out in the black-silver of the night and Beldare paused to listen carefully. "Fact is," he resumed furtively. "Bill kinda got hisself in a scrape 'nd killed a man. That's why he ain't come in hisself. But he's alive 'nd if ye was to ride out to him with his gold, I reckon he'd take it kindly."

Beldare paused and waited. The stranger said nothing, and the silence grew uncomfortable between them. Then a drum of hoofs sounded far out in the night. The sound grew into a loud clatter and men began shouting along the street of Fletcher's Gulch. Beldare stiffened, his head canted to drink in every sound. Somewhere a man shouted something.

"Jactino's headed back!"

Beldare started, then whispered tersely, "Ye comin' to see Bill?"

Maurice Summers shook his head. "I'll have to get his gold ready to travel. That'll take an hour or so. I'll meet you."

"Come to Bloody Wells," Beldare whispered hurriedly. "Come to Bloody Wells." The man was gone, then, any sound of his furtive leaving buried in the resounding commotion of the street.

Thoughtfully Maurice Summers walked out into the light and the flow of excited, running men. The situation was altering, taking new

shape before the slow inexorable pressure of his mere presence. A low deadly anticipation ran through him. Not yet were friend and enemy sharply defined, but the strange and terrible threat of Apache fury no longer buried the dim trail of William Summers. And thinking of his brother brought a sharpness and a harshness to Maurice Summer's face.

"Men," Hank Benedict shouted from the porch of the Fletcher's Gulch general store. "Jactino brushed with the cavalry down in the Huachucas 'nd he's headed back. He's had two fights, so he must be low on ammunition." A low surge of sound rose tonelessly from the crowd. "Keep yore eyes peeled, men, 'nd yore rifles close to hand!"

Little knots of men gathered to talk of the horror hanging over their heads, and Maurice Summers moved among them with studied silence. Then Hank Benedict noticed him and approached.

"Ye'll hang close to town, Summers," Benedict advised. "Ain't man nor critter safe till we get ourselves shet o' that bloody renegade Jactino."

Summers nodded curtly, studying Hank Benedict, noting the hard pressure of determination that drove the man and made him leader of the Fletcher's Gulch makeshift civilian army.

"I'm moving out to Dutch Malone's place in the morning," Summers said quietly. "Where can I buy some dynamite?"

Hank Benedict stiffened, his face darkening with anger. "Ye're a double-damned fool, Summers!" he snapped. "Warn't for the fact ye don't know this country I'd think ye was settin' for to meet up with Jactino. Now this here—"

"I'll risk it," Summers cut him off. "I got a rifle and I can use it." He eyed Benedict with sharp challenge. "Unless you've got a reason for keeping me under your eye."

Hank Benedict cursed. Then he shook his head and stomped off. Men who had stood near and caught the talk between Summers and Hank Benedict eyed the stranger with open suspicion. Men didn't deliberately risk Jactino's savagery, not even feather-brained pilgrims. And something about Maurice Summers' lean tight jaw told plain that he was far from being a featherbrain.

Keenly aware of the town's edginess and the dangerous tension, Summers left the street and made himself ready for bed. Far out in the darkness coyotes howled. Apaches lurked in the shadows and schemed their cruel ferocities. And there, too, dimmed by time and the rapacity of men, twisted the faint trail of Bill Summers. The stranger touched the cold steel of his heavy revolver and grinned into the darkness with mirthless joy.

He would pick his own way.

THE sun was less than two hours high when Maurice Summers led his four-mule pack train through the chaparral flats below Wolf Nose. The heat was a crisp baking pressure that brought fleeting memories of Egyptian campaigns, but then there had been many. Now he was alone. A zopilote wheeled effortlessly overhead and watched as the lone white man turned away toward the stone wilderness of the Whetstones. Once Summers thought he caught a faint ribbon of smoke rising far back in the mountains, but the bright sterile sunlight tired his searching gaze and he wasn't certain.

Dutch Malone's place was a squat stone house built in the center of a wide boulder-filled wash. Huge chunks of rock spread in thick confusion from bank to bank, pressing in almost to the narrow doorway. Drift sand layered thick inside the one room, crisscrossed by tracks of lizards and snakes.

Summers unpacked his meager supplies and then squatted in the shade and smoked, his eyes playing along the canyon rim and carefully measuring the boulders. The heat was a terrible thing in the canyon bottom and he wondered at a man's making his home there. Then he rose and cleaned out the house. He carefully allotted water to the mules, and he kept watch on the stone heights of the Whetstones.

But the day slipped away and faded into a night that brought furtive noises on the shifting layers of air from the deep canyons of the inner Whetstones.

In the masking darkness Summers unpacked the mule loads of blasting powder and worked away the hours setting charges. Then he smoked again and let his thoughts rove back across the impressions he had gained since first reaching Fletcher's Gulch. He thought of Hank Benedict and the man's determined fight against Jactino's Apache raiders. Benedict had been quick to shut Beldare's mouth there in the Cantina, and Benedict had openly protested against Summers' buying the giant powder. Beldare was an outlaw, cattle rustler, many times a murderer, Summers knew. And he had the cunning courage of a mountain lobo. Then the thought of his own brother filled Summers with deep fury and he thumbed out his pipe.

The roar of giant powder sent echoes of sound surging up the wash into the gray dim dawn. Dust rose high and Summers moved into the haze with a contented half smile. A boulder weighing nearly half a ton had been lightly tossed aside by his experienced blast. He made another charge, calculating the weight and drift of the stone, measuring carefully the powder. With a craftsman's pride he stood back and watched the stone erupt in a volcano of splinters. Time was working

against him now and he drove himself through the heat of the day, blasting away the boulders that ringed his tiny stone hut. Only when darkness shut down over him did he cease, and then only until dawn enabled him to return to his chores.

Late in the second afternoon Hank Benedict and two men rode up the wash, their faces dour and harsh with their unvoiced suspicions.

"Here's the powder ye bought," Benedict growled. "Ye got enough now to lift the lid off'n hell. And I hear tell yore friend Beldare was in town lookin' for ye."

Maurice Summers wiped the perspiration from his heat-flushed face and poured tobacco into his pipe. He was alienating the man by refusing to explain things, he realized. But the time wasn't yet ripe.

Seeing that the stranger wasn't going to explain, Hank Benedict said bluntly, "We aim to spend the night."

Summers met the bleak challenging stare and nodded. It wasn't what he wanted, and yet he couldn't refuse. Hank Benedict and the two Fletcher's Gulchers rode up to the house and dismounted. Summers resumed his blasting, sending the boulders tumbling and splintering. Then as darkness fell he walked back to the house. Hank Benedict had a lantern going and one of the men was making supper.

"Stranger," Hank Benedict said. "I ain't aimin' to pry into yore affairs. It ain't no never-ye-mind o' mine who ye be or what ye're after. But ye ain't safe out here. Why, even the four o' us couldn't stand a lot o' show ag'in Jactino, 'nd ye alone—"

Summers shrugged. "I'm not after Jactino."

A horse nickered in the darkness outside, and they all paused to listen. Then boots crunched the stone and sand and a figure appeared in the doorway.

Beldare stared from Summers to Hank Benedict, and the lamp light brought a green glint to his narrowed eyes. Indecision and suspicion stark in his eyes, the outlaw half crouched. Hank Benedict slid sideways along the wall, his hand close to his heavy caliber beltgun. Maurice Summers cursed inwardly. Shooting now would prove nothing. The time was so nearly ripe, but this, now. . . .

"Come in, Beldare, and eat," Summers invited.

Beldare stood for a moment, then he stepped into the stone hut.

"Ye didn't come to Bloody Wells," he said accusingly. "I seen Bill 'nd he was waitin' for ya there."

Maurice Summers shook his head. "I wasn't sure of the way. And I've been thinking." The stranger's head rose and he met Beldare's narrowed eye. "It's a lot of gold to be packed through the mountains on no more

than a stranger's word. No offence, understand, just a bit of caution."

Beldare flicked his glance about the room, feeling his way cautiously. He studied Hank Benedict and the two Fletcher's Gulch men who stood close by.

"Bill thunk that was it," he said slowly. "He sent this to show ya he trusted me." Beldare drew an ornate gold watch from his pocket. Watching Benedict, he handed the watch to Summers.

Benedict growled wordless astonishment as Summers carefully examined the time piece. The stranger's fingers trembled and he knotted his fist. Then he snapped the watch shut.

"That's William Summers' watch!"

Beldare nodded. "So I told ya. Now if—" Beldare stopped talking and looked slant-wise at Hank Benedict.

"The gold is here," Maurice Summers said. "Tell Bill to come and get it."

Beldare shook his head. "He won't come in, you know that. I told you why. He wants—"

"If he wants the gold, tell him to come here after it," Maurice Summers snapped.

Beldare hesitated and then nodded. He backed out into the night without further protest. Then his mount could be heard moving away.

"By the teetotal, stranger," Benedict swore. "Td a bet my bottom dollar yore brother was done. I reckon—"

"William Summers is dead," Maurice Summers said slowly. "I suspected that when he stopped writing to me. And now I know who killed him. That's why I came to this country, and that's why I listened to Beldare, when I knew he was an outlaw. Beldare killed him—and now I'm going to kill Beldare!"

BENEDICT growled again, the sound of his fury filling the tiny room.

"Ye can't swing it alone, Summers!"

"Beldare thinks the gold is here," Maurice Summers said quietly. "He can't produce William Summers so he'll try taking it by force. I'll be ready."

"Hellsafire, lad!" Benedict snorted. "He'll bush ya afore ye know he's around. Them boulders out there'll give him perfect cover. We'll stay 'nd—"

"No. This is my grudge. I'll handle it!"

"Ye can't handle it!" Hank Benedict glowered at the stubborn stranger. "Ye don't know this country or that killer. Ye been in some army, I kin tell that by yore walk, 'nd ye keep cool in a pinch. But ye don't know—"

Far up the wash echoes began stirring, bringing an alertness and caution to the men in the stone house. Benedict blew the lantern. They stood silent then, listening and straining the darkness with their eyes. The clatter of

the horse's gait was marred as the animal stumbled and a man's curse sounded sharp and desperate.

"Ho, Whitman!" Benedict shouted. "Dutch Malone's place! Light the lantern, men. That's Bully Whitman killin' his horse."

The running horse veered towards the sounds of Benedict's yell. Then a lean, gray-whiskered little man stumbled towards the door.

"Jactino—he's less'n four miles behind!"

Benedict cursed slowly. He shoved the weary horseman into a chair and poured him a mug of coffee. While the man drank, Benedict plied him with questions.

"Take my sorrel," Benedict said. "Tear her hide off, gettin' to Fletcher's Gulch. Me'n the lads'll try holdin' them 'Paches here till ye get back."

Whitman nodded and stumbled to his feet. Then he climbed up on Hank Benedict's rested sorrel and spurred away.

"Douse the light!" Hank Benedict ordered. "Get yore long-guns 'nd let's set outside for a while. But don't get too far away so's to get cut off from this shack. We'll be a needin' its stone walls aplenty afore—"

Hank Benedict broke off and listened. A single rifle shot had slammed noisily a bare two hundred yards from the stone hut. A pistol made a lighter sound, then was cut off by the rifle's slamming thunder.

"That was Bully Whitman," someone guessed softly.

As if in answer, a rifle bellowed and lead whined through the high window to thunk against the far wall. Summers slammed the plank door. A second rifle slug tore into the wood.

"That ain't Jactino," Benedict figured. "It must be Beldare makin' his play early. Damn his soul to hell!"

A rifle bellowed twice and then it was quiet.

"Beldare! Nance Beldare!" Benedict yelled. "I know it's you, Beldare, so ye can answer me!"

"What's rilin' ya, Benedict?"

"Jactino's riding this way," Hank Benedict shouted. "Call this off 'nd let one o' us ride to warn Fletcher's Gulch. They's women and kids there, man, 'nd that bloody butcher'll..."

Beldare's taunting laugh floated through the darkness. "Jactino don't worry me. They ain't my kids."

The utter ruthlessness of the man stilled Hank Benedict's pleading. He moved toward the door with grim determination, a sheath knife clutched in his fingers.

"I'll find that skunk 'nd—"

Maurice Summers shoved the Indian fighter away. A flurry of rifle slugs ate into the door. A few punched on through to sing a deadly chant of hatred as they glanced from the

stone. One of the Gulchers fired and a shrill scream testified either to his marksmanship—or luck.

Rifle flame winked from the boulder field surrounding the cabin and Benedict cursed with swelling fury. He ripped three shots at the muzzle flash.

"If Jacinto is coming, we'll need that powder," Maurice Summers said.

Mention of the Apache cooled them and they sat in the darkness without bothering to answer Nance Beldare's baiting.

THE dawn came with a reluctant showing of dim gray shapes in the gloom. Neither side had fired for almost an hour, but Summers knew that Beldare hadn't withdrawn. Hank Benedict and his two friends were asleep, rifles across their arms.

"Rouse us if'n they try anything," Benedict had said. "They can't come in 'nd we can't go out. It's going to take Jactino to settle this."

Peering into the dim light, Summers watched as the remaining boulders surrounding the house were brought into view. Then the shadows parted enough so that he caught a glimpse of a savage brown visage, the three blue marks of fighting Apache plain across the lank jaw. Clamping his jaws tight against a surging urge to start firing, Summers watched as other Apaches scuttled through the gloom and settled behind the boulders. Then Hank Benedict roused and grunted. Summers motioned him toward the door.

Benedict peered out cautiously. Then his rifle blasted the dawn quiet into splintered echoes. "Ye double-damned fool, Summers!" Benedict yelled. "Them Apaches'll take cover in them boulders till all hell can't get 'em out!"

Both Fletcher's Gulchers sided Benedict and they poured deadly fire into the gray dawn. But the skulking figures of the Apaches slunk from boulder to boulder. One leaped high as Summers fired. Benedict slammed another to the ground but still they inched along until a quick spurt took them to cover. A ragged barrage swept the wash and lead thunked and whined along the stone house, driving the whites back from the windows and the rapidly splintering door.

"Where's Beldare?" Maurice Summers asked, peering into the haze.

"How the hell should I know!" Hank Benedict aimed carefully and fired. "But there warn't no shootin' when Jactino came up, so they's in this together."

Again lead spattered against the stone house, and Summers flipped blood from a splinter-torn finger. Powder smoke roiled thick in the little room, billowed into fantastic shapes by the breeze eddying through the narrow win-

dows and the sagging heavy, shot-splintered door.

"They'll try a rush 'nd then it's curtains," Hank Benedict stormed. "If'n only ye'd 'a held them back from them boulders. If'n only—"

"Where's Nance Beldare?"

"He's ahint that hunk o' rock there," one of the Gulchers snorted, pointing toward a huge boulder.

Summers stared at the boulder for a long time. Then he laid down his rifle and crawled over to the fireplace. The Gulchers stared at him wide-eyed.

"Make sure he doesn't leave," Summers said as he poured tobacco into his pipe. "He's got to be first."

Lead hammered and yowled through the stone hut as the Apaches crept ever closer. Then the sun threw bright color into the wash. The light showed targets for the besieged guns and they began taking toll.

"Get up here, Summers," Benedict growled, his face sweaty and streaked with his own blood. He swore and slammed his rifle into line. The gun bucked and Benedict snarled, his eyes never leaving the aperture from which he fired. "Pick up that rifle. Maybe we can hold them back a while now."

Summers grunted but didn't move. He sat waiting with expectancy dark in his eyes. Then suddenly a great gouting fan of thunderous noise and billowing dust rose high. The echoes had barely died before another—and then another—tremendous blast shook the stone hut.

"God Amighty!" Benedict breathed. "Who. . . ."

Another terrific blast shook the wash. The rifle fire died away. Then Benedict's gun began slamming out.

"Keep 'em duckin' lads," he crowed. "Keep 'em hunkered down."

Benedict threw a quick glance toward the silent stranger and saw him in the act of lighting half a dozen fuses that trailed away under the stone wall. For a moment the Indian fighter's countenance clouded, and then dawning realization made its glow. He chuckled.

"They's a whole passel o' skeered 'Paches ahind thet boulder over to the left," he directed. "If'n ye got a charge under that'un, let 'er go!"

Maurice Summers nodded and sorted out a fuse. "Like Nance Beldare went?"

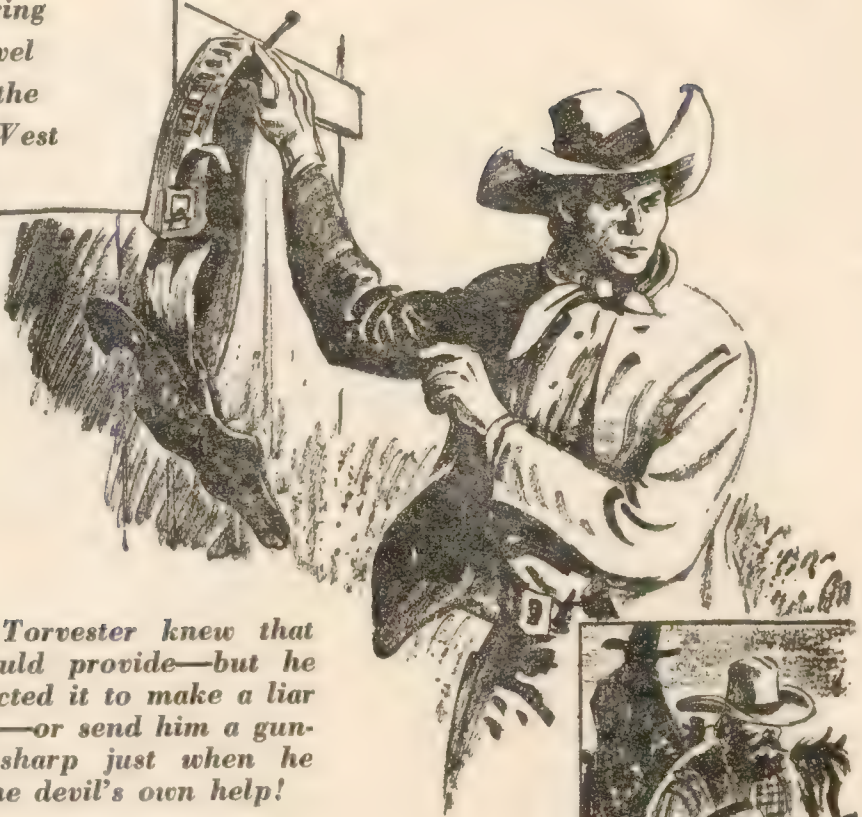
The wash surged with sound and gravel spattered the stone walls.

"Like Nance Beldare went," Benedict exulted. "We'll keep 'em ahind those boulders. You bust 'em up."

Grinning like a pleased school boy, Maurice Summers sorted his fuses. "They're all mined. That's why I left them. And if my matches hold out. . . ." He grinned again, and thunder shook the canyon from end to end.

SIX-

A
Stirring
Novel
of the
Old West



Old Fred Torvester knew that heaven would provide—but he never expected it to make a liar out of him—or send him a gun-totin' cardsharp just when he needed the devil's own help!

CHAPTER ONE

The Pilgrim

IT WAS evening on Halfaday Creek when Ross Bicknell arrived at the big headquarters ranch of Fred Torvester. Kip, the ranchman's young son, opened the door to see him standing there on the gallery, limned against the bright glow of an October sunset—lean and tall and keen, with the hard tiredness of a longrider, holding his black hat in his lean hands. Behind him lay the flat sweep of the sage valley and a far-off view of the Mule Jaw Range.

Bicknell must have traveled far that day; his worn trail clothing was sprinkled with a salt-white film of alkali. His straight crow-black hair was streaked with it, and the mica on his high, star-stitched boots sparkled in the out-shining lamplight of the ranchhouse living room.

"Evenin'," he said in a slow, lackluster voice. "My pony threw a shoe back yonder, and I wonder if you could put me up for the night?"

Kip, twelve years old, freckled and grave-eyed, was plainly flattered that the stranger had asked *him* instead of inquiring for his father. "Why, sure," he said in his deepest



GUN SINNER

By ROD PATTERSON



voice. "Jest put your hoss down in the starve-out and I'll git mom to set an extry plate fer supper. You c'd eat with the boys, on'y they've et a'ready and hit fer town."

It was as casually as this that Ross Bicknell entered the lives of the Torvesters—by sheer chance. He rode in off the plains to alter a score of lives; and before twelve hours had passed there were some who fervently wished he had never come at all. It seems that somehow the responsibility in time of stress rests on the shoulders of one man. This seems to be so whether a wagon train and thirty souls are in peril, or whether it be a home or a city or a nation whose fate hangs by a thread. There is always one man whose personal action, whose success or failure turns the tide, one way or another.



When Ramsey charged like a berserk bull, Bicknell clipped him. . . .

Kip Torvester turned around and marched back into the house, leaving the door wide open, while the stranger led his limping sorrel down across the rut scarred yard, past the 'dobe bunkhouse, the horse barn, the windmill, to the peeled-pole corral at the base of the rise on which the many-windowed dwelling stood.

Bicknell did not look back or he would have seen that the boy's place in the doorway was promptly occupied by Nancy Torvester, nineteen-year-old daughter of the house: a really pretty girl with hazel eyes and a deeply tanned oval face. Nancy watched the stranger, while with one slim hand she held back the tendrils of chestnut hair the wind was plucking at. And Bicknell busied himself at the corral with cinch and saddle and bridle reins, an aloof and somehow austere figure in the gloom.

And Nancy had disappeared when he went back to the low-railed gallery—now her father was waiting there, big and solemn, and patient in his intent scrutiny. The two shook hands gravely, deliberately, appraising each other carefully before committing themselves to speech.

Fred Torvester was slow and burly and thoroughly self-contained. He had a flame-red, close-trimmed beard and the bluest of blue eyes. Dressed in gray jeans and red check shirt, he wore no weapon of any kind. His voice matched his huge frame well; at times it was like a tolling bell, and when he chose to let it out, he roared like an angry bull. Behind his back, his men called him "Preacher Fred" because he had a talent for reciting the Holy Writ like a prophet chanting from a mountain-top.

But Ross Bicknell's voice was soft and drawling, sort of damn-it-take-your-time. Mostly it was like silk stroked gently against crinoline. He was built like a willow lance, and his face was all angles and sharp planes; his wide-placed eyes were netted with a fine pattern of crow-track lines, the cheekbones pushing up tautly against the coppery, dry, tight skin. He was a man of long silences, and when he talked it was not much; he was often inscrutable and cold.

TORVESTER was the first to speak, and what he said was mercilessly blunt, though it must have been a guess. "You're a gunman, ain't yuh, stranger?"

Bicknell returned his blank and steady stare and did not make a reply. The big man added in a succinct tone, "You're a gamblin' man as well, judgin' by your hands. They was made to play with the devil's toys."

A sardonic grin faintly turned Ross Bicknell's mouth. "By Joe," he said admiringly, "you see a thing or two!"

"Your gun's strapped low, that's how I knew your trade," the bearded ranchman said,

"And stranger, I'm plumb ashamed for you!"

Bicknell laughed out loud—it was like the sound of breaking ice. "Well; now," he said. "I do match my wits against other men with a gun or cards, and I smoke some and take a snort of red-eye now and then. And maybe I cuss a bit—if the occasion calls for it and I'm so inclined."

"Oh?" Torvester said. "Too bad."

"Shucks," Ross Bicknell sighed, "now I've gone and talked myself out of a meal and bed tonight!"

"Goin' far?" Torvester asked, blandly, mildly.

"Over the hill," the stranger said with a shallow shrug. "I *had* hoped you might be needin' a good rope hand for a week or two."

A gauging wisdom crept into the ranchman's light blue eyes. "It does take the best a man's got to match wits with all comers in these here times," he admitted reluctantly. "I freely grant yuh that. But—" he paused to give the words more weight—"I never hired a gun hand yet. I never will hire one—if I know it ahead o' time!"

"My gun," Ross Bicknell snapped, "ain't up for hire—not none!"

A silence came. Torvester broke it finally with his booming voice, "I wouldn't turn a dog away if he come to me for food. Come in and eat, but that's all I c'n do for yuh."

Bicknell obeyed without another word. He washed and brushed himself in the old woodshed, and when he came into the kitchen at last, ducking his head to clear the door, his cheekbones bore a polished shine and his hair was soaking wet and black as paint, with a clean white part cutting through it as straight as a tight-drawn string.

Torvester did the honors with a reserved affability and an absent smile. Bicknell met Nancy, wide-eyed and trim in calico, who curtsied daintily to him in the dim lamplight. Her mother, Hannah, looked at him with open doubt, a tall, bony, hipless woman with the quiet eyes of a Quaker wife. Young Kip was dumb; he only stared in pop-eyed wonderment at Bicknell's low-tied gun.

Hannah lashed him with her trenchant voice, "Kippie, what ails you, son?"

The boy started guiltily. "Howdydo," he stammered out. "I—gosh!"

But Bicknell laughed and smiled his thin flat smile. He bent his amber-colored eyes on Nancy, openly admiring her from head to toe, not brazenly, but almost with boyish candor. The girl turned pink, though she didn't budge her eyes from his. She said, in a firm and throaty voice, "Supper's on," and nodded her dark curls towards the table set for five.

"Thank you, miss," Ross Bicknell said, and quickly stripped his heavy gunbelt off and draped it casually from his chair.

They ate in silence, after a long and solemn grace pronounced by Preacher Fred in a sonorous voice. Bicknell didn't bow his head but watched the girl's flushed face with his direct, keen gaze. Afterwards he consumed what was placed in front of him, devoured it with a restrained voracity. He allowed the silence to run on, with no embarrassment at all.

The shrewd stare of his host was pinned on him throughout the meal. Later on, with the women clearing off the supper things and Kip bundled off to bed, Torvester led Bicknell into the spacious living room with its steer horns and fireplace and ancient furniture.

The ranchman turned up the green-shaded table lamp. "I want to talk to yuh," he said, sinking easefully into a cowhide rocking chair while Bicknell sat in a straight-backed one. "I c'n see, Bicknell, that yuh made a wrong turn somewheres. What you need is to settle down and stop them fiddle feet of yours from totin' yuh around. Now, we're Christian people here, and—"

Bicknell cut him off, staring through a haze of smoke that curled up from his fresh-rolled cigarette. "Your beliefs have got their good points, no doubt," he drawled. "But don't waste your breath on a man like me."

Torvester laid his thick arms on his knees, and leaned forward over them. "Bicknell, I've changed my mind since I asked yuh in. I can use a good man for a week or two, and I think you'll do—if yuh really want to work for me." He studied the other man from under an awning of reddish, heavy brows. "One thing, Bicknell. Have yuh ever killed a man?"

Bicknell looked at him, his bronzed face inscrutable and cold. Then he said, "I've killed three men!"

Torvester winced as from a blow. Then he sighed and said, "Bicknell, I hate a liar almost worse than anything. And I'm plumb glad yuh had the gumption to up and tell the truth."

A quick smile flicked across Bicknell's wire-thin mouth. "Well, wait a minute," came his quick protest. "I ain't a red-eyed killer, after all. Them three I got had as good a chance as me to keep on breathin' air. All three times 'twas just a simple case of slow."

Torvester nodded understandingly, if a little puzzled by the stranger's words, spoken so openly. He leaned back in his rocking chair, steeping his big red hands.

"All right," he said. "Fall round-up's been goin' on for a week—ten days. All the outfits in Cajon County are workin' together and gatherin' all the cattle on Dogie Flats, just south o' here. It's the biggest show this country's ever seen." He stopped, pausing, trying to fathom the look on Bicknell's mask-like face. He said, abruptly then, "Reckon yuh've noticed I don't wear no shootin' iron and mebber wondered why. Well, guns and trouble travel

double, friend. I shucked off my own four years ago—and not a man in my crew totes one."

"Interestin' as all hell," said Bicknell. "I sure admire your nerve!"

"I'm askin' you to hang yours up," Torvester said commandingly, "till the day you draw your time and drift. That fair enough?"

ROSS BICKNELL studied his fingernails, stroked those of his left hand slowly against his stained black vest. Then he looked up and toward the kitchen door, for a rustle had sounded there. Nancy Torvester was standing in the opening, poised like a bird arrested in quick flight, with her hazel eyes large and her red mouth parted a bit to give a glimpse of small white teeth. He smiled at her and said, without moving his steady glance away, "Brother, I'll take that!"

Torvester shoved out a huge red paw. "Shake hands with another sinner, Bick." Their hands came together, gripped hard, then fell away. The ranchman looked toward his daughter and said with some relief, "Go call your Ma in here, my girl. We'll read some Scripture; later on I'll show Bicknell where the bunkhouse is."

When they were quietly seated around the marble-topped center table, Torvester carried a huge Bible over and smoothed it open on his knee. Slowly, reverently, he thumbed the worn and dog-eared pages back and forth. But he never found the passage he was seeking for that night.

A rider galloped into the ranch yard. Boots hit the ground close to the house; spurs jingled up and climbed the steps. There was a quick knock and Fred Torvester got up and went over and opened the door.

The man who stood blocked against the black night was stocky and wide, built like a grizzly, with sloping solid shoulders and biceps that stretched the seams of his fleece-lined coat. He had shaggy brownish hair that showed an untrimmed edge beneath the wide brim of a hat. Florid of face though not over thirty, he had a flat satiric mouth and pale greenish eyes, like those of a mountain lion.

He pulled his hat off as he came clanking into the living room, squinting against the light. To Nancy he bowed, sweeping his hat out wide; then his strange eyes traveled to Ross Bicknell where he sat, with reflected lamplight on his stolid face. The caller stiffened slowly, the way a dog will bristle at sight of another encroaching on his domain. He swung his gaze around as Torvester shut the door and turned.

"Fred, who is this gent?"

The rancher had placed his Bible back on the table, eyeing the newcomer with some distaste. Then he looked at Bicknell and said,

"This here's Ford Ramsey, Bick. Meet Ross Bicknell, Ford—he just rode in a while ago."

Suspicion tightened Ramsey's ruddy face. He stared at Bicknell, speaking in a tone intended to ice a stranger down. "Where from?"

"My business," Bicknell told him off, "and none of your own."

"We don't want strangers here."

A clear cold flame flickered in Bicknell's eyes. "You can go pound salt!"

It was like a deliberate slap in the face. Ramsey pulled back almost imperceptibly, and then said, "Friend, when I ask a civil question I usually get a civil answer."

Bicknell spoke—not angrily, but quietly, reasonably. "I've met your kind before. You blow in like a big wind with no place to go—just a ring-tailed rooster on the prod!"

The pupils of Ramsey's eyes contracted suddenly, like those of a cat in strong sunlight. "A little tip, Bickford—or whatever your handle is. Stay off Dogie Flats! I'll have no blasted tin horns messin' up the round-up!"

"Hold on, you two!" Torvester's protesting voice boomed through the house. "What's all this hooraw about? Why can't you boys behave?"

"Never mind, Fred!" snapped Ramsey in a tone that twanged unpleasantly. He stirred his big frame and took two steps toward the chair where Bicknell calmly sat. "You talk too much and raise a heap of dust," he said. "But maybe you'd like to step outside and—"

"Why, damn your red-rimmed eyes!" Ross Bicknell breathed, and slowly pulled his stretched-out legs back to the chair.

Ford Ramsey's gun was on his hip and a venomous look was on his face. Bicknell's gun was hanging from a peg behind the kitchen door; and it might as well have been dangling twenty miles away for all the good it would do him now if Ramsey decided to make a draw.

Torvester projected his anxious voice between the two. "Bick, Ramsey's the boss o' Bell, and—"

"A little ringy, too, by the looks of things," Bicknell began. He stared hard into the big man's face. "Ramsey—"

Then Ramsey moved. He did not draw his gun, but thrust out a hand and crooked it toward Bicknell's collar. Things happened fast after that. Bicknell uncoiled from his sitting position; and he was up like a spring released. He moved with piston-driven swiftness. His two hands went out faster than the eye could see. One moment Ford Ramsey was reaching for a hold—the next he was being dragged bodily across the long room and flung backward into the night by a man twenty pounds lighter than himself.

They all heard the crash on the gallery; that and the wild howl that followed it. Bicknell

moved back toward the center of the room through a silence that was almost palpable. He deliberately turned his back on the wide-open door, and it was this cold indifference the Torvesters saw—this indifference and the hardness of his smile which remained on his lips as he glanced from face to face. An old scar on his temple showed white in the lamplight, and his black hair fell across his forehead; and his breathing was deep and slow. He put his gaze on Nancy, and in that steady scrutiny was a bright regard, the faintest touch of shame. He stood like that, erect and tall and dark, and then he shrugged.

"Sorry," he murmured apologetically. "Guess my latigo kind of slipped."

CHAPTER TWO

Rawhide Round-up

THE fall round-up was traveling east from the Arizona Territory line, with ten outfits, six wagons, some sixty or seventy hands, and nearly three hundred horses, with a score of stray men scouting the hills and draws and arroyos to the north of the shallow Salt River, and sweeping down to the open plain a vast herd of Texas steers.

For over a week they had been moving towards Dogie Flats, a region just south of Torvester's T-Dot headquarters, shaped like a giant plate whose remote edges, formed by low foothills, gave out to barren hard-rock country on the north, to the escarpment of the Mule Jaw Range on the south, to pine-stippled uplands on the west.

When Torvester and Bicknell arrived at the holding spot, ten miles below T-Dot, the following morning, they jogged at once towards the T-Dot chuck wagon where it stood with open bows in the *canāda*, along with the rigs of the other outfits, grouped in a half-circle. The gray smoke of the cookfires spiraled peacefully into a blue, cloudless sky.

A hundred feet from the round-up camp was a sea of red-eyed skittish steers, a forest of tossing, clashing horns. The herd, packed solidly as far as the eye could reach, formed a scene of never-ending activity. There were thousands of animals here, milling constantly beneath a hot hard sun: slates, blacks, blues, duns, speckled reds, linebacks, paints, old moss-heads out of the chaparral, scattered bulls and old dry cows, and cows with missing calves. Most of the steers were of the Spanish Longhorn breed, rangy, long-legged beasts with stamina and wind that would presently carry them to the market at Washita under their own slow power.

Some brands were now being cut out and held in compact bunches, but the big show was in full swing to the accompaniment of a raw-

hide symphony. Cattle bawled and blatted and milled; horns made a steady clattering sound; hoofs rumbled in the dust. Hands were changing to fresh horses; riders were cutting out scrubs and all cows with late missed calves, and turning bunch-quitters which tried to break for the hills. And all through the dust and the din men yelled and cursed and whipsawed their horses back and forth and swung their long lass' ropes.

As Torvester and Bicknell approached the T-Dot wagon, another rider slipped toward them from the dust-haze near the herd. He was Bob McClune, a tall, sun-burned and dusty man who was *segundo* for Torvester's home ranch; and he was cursing bitterly as he reined up.

"Yuh wouldn't listen to me afore, Fred, but now the whole damn' dirty mess comes out! Jest like I said, we've been stole blind fer the last six months!"

Preacher Fred dismounted so heavily he almost pulled his bay over on top of him. He faced clumsily around, an alarmed look on his whiskered face. "What's Shawn counted so far?" he asked in a worried tone. "Our stuff must be all here and we oughta tally two thousand head, at least."

"Two thousand, hell!" the foreman said disgustedly. "So far Ed's checked off eight hundred and now T-Dot is thinnin' out!"

Torvester never took his pained eyes from McClune's grim face until Ross Bicknell spoke. "Fred, leave me snoop around a bit. I've done this kind of work before, and I ain't knowed by anybody here—I might scratch up some dope for you." There was no gun on Bicknell's belt, no rifle in his saddle slot; his pistol dangled from a peg in the T-Dot kitchen back at Halfaday, where he had promised it would stay till the day he took his time and drifted on.

"Well, I don't know." Torvester said it doubtfully, scrubbing a huge red paw over his close-cropped beard. "I can't afford to let a man o' mine go r'arin' around makin' enemies for T-Dot. Yuh mixed it up with Ramsey last night and—"

Bicknell threw up his hands impatiently. "Ramsey asked for what he got. And I ain't as proddy as I made you think."

Torvester glanced quickly at Bob McClune on his grulla horse. "What say, Bob? Shall I let him go ahead?"

The foreman stared at Bicknell a moment and then he looked down at the ranchman, saying, "What kin yuh lose, Fred? If Bicknell's got the guts to rod a dirty job it's his own damn' funeral. Besides, I figure the rustlers ain't very far from here."

Torvester spread his hands apart and said, "All right, Bick. But make blame' sure you're right 'fore yuh open that trap o' yours." He

bent over and picked up his trailing bridle reins, adding in a hopeful tone, "If yuh find the ones that're tryin' to jerk me down, you'll save my shirt. I got a note to pay next month or git busted down to my boots. I just *got* to find two thousand cows!"

Bicknell didn't speak, but dismounted at once, knotting the reins of his sorrel to the tailboard of the chuck wagon, then turning and moving toward the herd, narrow-hipped, tall, his long legs slightly saddle-bowed.

Dust billowed over a scene of noisy confusion. Shouts of the cowboys were dim and smothered in an uproar of bellows and bleats; the hoof-thunder rolling across the hard-packed ground muffled the cracks of quirts on leather chaps; and the dozen or so tallymen's lips might have been moving silently as they counted and recorded.

AROUND the T-Dot branding fire the heat and dust were fog-thick and strangling. Ross Bicknell walked up and tried to read the tally book over Ed Shawn's chunky shoulder but he couldn't make it out, and said, "How many T-Dot now?" in a tone that was almost a yell.

Shawn looked around and up from the baked ground where he sat, and jerked the kerchief down from his smudged round face. "Nine hundred and twenty-two, but they're comin' in less and less. Looks like the biggest steal this county's ever seen!" He blinked his inflamed eyes and spat. "Preacher Fred is gonna holler like a cow-kicked dawg!"

A shout came from the nearby branding fire: "T-Dot, one beef!" There was a hiss and the acrid stench of burning hide as the iron man laid on the small road brand.

"T-Dot, one beef!" echoed Shawn, and he slapped his pencil down hard on the sweat-streaked tally book.

Bicknell looked around, no expression on his face or in his gold-flecked eyes; he watched the steers come swooping in over the rough, uneven ground, dragged flat and helpless by the straining ropes. The cutting horses wheeled and pivoted, nimble as antelopes, swinging the steers up to the fire. Crouching men dropped on the prostrate cows, cast off the ropes and grabbed for the long red-hot rods of iron that bristled from the fire like hedgehog quills. The sweating men swore and yelled and shoved the irons back into the glowing coals. Behind them, other frantic steers bawled and made short, angry charges at the dust-caked cutting horses. The sunlight came in a filtered glare through tons of flying dust; the air was loaded with drifting mica shards, with alkali and the smell of scorched hair and cows and men and saddle leather and strong horse-sweat.

Bicknell pulled his shoulders back and

moved deliberately away from the T-Dot fire. At that instant, a rider broke out of the murk on a roan horse streaked black with sweat and foam. A cow and her calf were running madly in front of him. The rider came on, riding hard, sitting straight and swinging a big full loop. He made his hard flat throw, and as the honda slapped against the spooked cow's neck, the roan sat back and the rider, with a quick flip, gave the rope a snaky wave that traveled hard and fast and hit the cow as the rope snapped taut. The cow seemed to come apart in every limb; she went up and over in a crashing fall, pinwheeling to the dust, and then lay still. The rider on the roan began to drag the stunned animal away.

"Hey, just a minute there!" Bicknell's face was set in stubborn lines. "You broke that critter's leg!"

A voice behind him yelled, "Say, Harry Horne, does Ramsey stand fer that?"

Bicknell moved toward the fallen cow whose calf was blatting pitifully nearby. The man called Horne swung down from his high-cantled stock saddle and shortened the distance between himself and the man who had challenged him. He was a thin man with a sun-blistered narrow face and flat-lidded sullen eyes. He reached the cow a second before Bicknell did. "This ain't no skin off your hide, fella!" he snapped. "And who the hell are you?"

Bicknell stopped two feet away. "That's a fancy throw you got. But you don't need it on that kind of stuff," he said.

Horne's eyes went cloudy with quick anger, and he said, "I ride for Bell—not your outfit!"

Bicknell bent over the motionless cow, carefully inspecting the black Bell brand. His face was tipped down so no one nearby could see the look on it; but several men noted the faint ripple of muscles along his jaw, and they saw the way he came erect and slowly turned to Harry Horne. His expression was utterly unreadable, but the tone of his voice, when he finally spoke, left no doubts in the witnesses that something unpleasant was about to happen here. His eyes were hard, icily implacable. "Horne," he stated with a slow, hard care, "that cow belongs to Preacher Fred! The T-Dot's been worked into a Bell—I'll bet my roll on it! How many more you got?"

Caught flat-footed and unprepared, Horne could only gape like an idiot. His mouth sagged loose and his eyes turned wet and he breathed like a man with a noose around his neck.

Then Bicknell did something that a man in his right mind would never do. He calmly reached over and snaked Horne's gun out of its holster. Before Horne could find his wits, Bicknell had bent over the cow again. Deliberately, he set the muzzle of the weapon

against the curly brow of the cow, and abruptly closed his hand. The cow's head and the gun gave a little jump apart; the shot was hardly audible; the smoke came drifting up. Bicknell straightened, restored the gun to Horne's belt, and he said, loud enough for all to hear, "Go and get your boss and bring him here."

Horne's face was congested with dammed-up blood. He coughed and choked and tried to speak, but failed to make a coherent sound. All at once, he whipped around, rushed at his horse and mounted it, scrambling awkwardly into the saddle. He grabbed the reins and lifted the roan into a driving run and vanished into the pall of dust around the herd.

TORVESTER came up on his dust-powdered bay. Preacher Fred's dusty beard appeared to bristle, and his forehead was glistening with tiny, twinkling beads of sweat when he pushed his hat far back. "What's this—what's this?" he hollered out. Then he saw the dead cow on the ground. "Bick, did you shoot that critter there?"

"Yes." Bicknell had his keen eyes on the herd as though looking for someone in particular. "It's leg was broke."

"But," Torvester choked, "that cow belongs to Bell!"

Bicknell flicked his gaze up to the ranchman's harried face. His voice was a lazy drawl. "You want to bet on it?"

Torvester flopped out of the saddle and landed on both feet, consternation on his bearded face. He walked toward the dead cow, examined it carefully, fingering the brand, studying it with his shrewd blue eyes, thinking, pondering, wondering. Then he straightened up and turned to Bicknell to speak to him. He never did. For, at that moment, a steady rhythm rose, the hoofs of horsemen drumming up and skirting the seething flank of the herd.

Other punchers were crowding up, drawn by the promise of conflict, avid as animals at the smell of blood. And now, off there on the right, a steady clopping sound increased; but the riders were still concealed by the smothering pall of dust. Then, abruptly, shadows appeared in the murk—shapeless outlines at first, then suddenly taking the shape of mounted men. And then a score of horsemen bulged out of the smoke, slowing down and moving in at a mincing walk. They were a sardonic-looking lot, with their hat brims tipped down in front, revolvers slapping lean thighs and rifles jutting from under saddle flaps. The man out front was Ford Ramsey, boss of Bell, unmistakable in spite of his shroud of dust and alkali.

Ramsey swung down from the saddle and, with his men holding a broken line in back of him, moved up towards Bicknell and Tor-

vester and the men grouped tensely around the dead cow. The dust had drifted like gray snow on Ramsey's hat; his eyebrows and lashes were silvered with it, but that semblance of old age couldn't hide the harsh jut of his chin or the headstrong, angry glitter of his eyes. He confronted Bicknell, not two yards away.

He stood with his shaggy head thrown back, and said in a loud, edged tone: "The fool-killer's got you this time, friend! Why in the name of the little Creepin' Judas did you shoot my cow?"

Bicknell remained at ease, quietly meeting the big man's accusing stare. He stood with his arms straight down, with his lean legs wide, with just a trace of a mocking grin upon his mouth. "Torvester's cow, I guess you mean."

Ramsey received the words without a blink. But, suddenly, what had been the face of an angry round-up boss wasn't even the face of a man any more; it was a chiseled mask. The only things alive in it were his queer, cold, mercilessly staring eyes.

More men were running up—curious riders booted their mounts in close, for they had caught the smell of fight. Bicknell was nearly a head taller than Ford Ramsey, but the Bell boss had a twenty-pound edge on weight. Bicknell stood there imperturbably, serenely waiting.

Behind the Bell owner, Ramsey's riders sat stiffly in their saddles, ready for the ruckus they knew would come. And then Fred Torvester's voice jumped into the breach.

"Ford, don't touch that gun! Can't yuh see my man ain't armed?"

Ramsey's flat mouth jerked; his heavy lids came down, screening the unreasoning hatred in his eyes. But his arm dropped slowly down again. He must have known that what he had to do would be harder now; he must have known it was far too late for ordinary words. He stood stock-still on his club-like legs, as brown and dead as a grizzly bear. He drew a deep and shaken breath and tried to smile, tried to signal secretly to his men in back of him. He listened, visibly, painfully. But only silence came—a silence none the less acute despite the heavy rumble of the herd.

And then Ford Ramsey charged.

Bicknell had braced himself for Ramsey's lunge, but the big man's weight, thrown out in that one violent, smashing plunge bore him backward a yard or two. He raised his arms and tried to strike the Bell man's fists aside. But Ramsey clinched. They swayed—then both men went down in a smother of high-flung dust. Ramsey let go a yell of fury, of relief, of sheer animal ferocity. He was on his knees, pawing in the dust and half blinded by it, lunging for Bicknell, who had rolled clear. But Bicknell was the first to stand up.

Ramsey got up and swung short. He ducked his head down and charged again, like a berserk bull. Bicknell clipped him on the cheek and spun him to a stop. The Bell boss grunted and charged again. But Bicknell was only a shadow before him now, a shadow that danced away, then closed in on silent feet to strike. . . . Ramsey's cheek was split from ear to chin and blood smeared his vest and coat and splashed into his eyes.

Bicknell never stopped his patient circling, never paused in his stabbing, slashing blows. There was a dark, drawn steadiness on his set face and a thin pale flame in his slitted eyes; he had an infinite endurance that could wait for the kill to come. Ramsey, pivoting awkwardly, watched Bicknell out of half-closed eyes. Suddenly he yelled again and flung himself wildly at the tall man, batting his arms down and trying for one clean, sharp blow. He never managed it. He took Bicknell's swinging fist on the head, bleating out his anger and his pain.

Bicknell bored in. He cuffed the Bell boss across the temple and hammered him in the throat and over the bridge of the nose. Ramsey hit the edge of the collected crowd; and hands reached out eagerly and flung him back. Bicknell saw his chance and started a round-house swing that exploded in Ramsey's face like a charge of dynamite.

Ford Ramsey dropped. But he was not out. He rolled over and got his knees under him and raised himself up on them, blinded, bloody, stunned.

"Damn you, Bicknell—if I could stand—" He choked, then gasped, "Horne—Embry—Gimme a hand! Help me up, damn you! I can lick that man—and by God I will!"

CHAPTER THREE

Blood On The Moon

PREACHER FRED and his crew were gathered about the tailboard of the chuck wagon late that afternoon, and the ranchman was pacing restlessly up and down before the group which squatted glumly on boot-heels and slowly smoked. Bob McClune was whittling furiously on a *piñon* stick. Ed Shawn, Pete Cassidy, Jack Stackhouse were hunkered near the cookfire, while the rest sat with their backs propped up against the wagon pole.

Ross Bicknell stood apart from Torvester and his men. He was backed up to the wagon's tailboard, a cigarette stuck nonchalantly to his lower lip. He was staring at his boss as the big man spoke, "I can't be sure Ramsey's the one that's cut me down. The way I see it—"

Bicknell broke in, drawing, "I showed you how they changed the T-Dot to a Bell. 'Twas

a neat job, or you'd agree with me right off."

"Ramsey's got a good name," Torvester insisted. "Nobody's ever fought with him but you."

Bicknell flattened his voice into the silence. "Then you mean to let him get away with it?"

The ranchman's edged voice said, "I won't have a cattle war kicked up, no matter what!"

"Turn the other cheek," Bicknell said sarcastically.

A discontented grumble, of anger and disgust, ran around the T-Dot crew. "It's no use, Bick," McClune opined in a bleak hard tone of voice. "I've tried to make him see you're right. We'll have to go along with him, that's all."

It was natural that T-Dot should turn to Ross Bicknell for at least partial leadership in the crisis that faced them now, even though he was virtually a stranger in their midst. He had proven his right to respect, if not outright admiration, by standing up to a bigger man unarmed and downing him alone and single-handedly. But Preacher Fred, usually a just man, now resented this almost rebellious turn.

"See here!" he roared. "One thing's got to be settled here and now. Who's runnin' this outfit? Him or me? Bick got us into this jackpot by shootin' off his mouth too soon, like I warned him not to do!"

McClune threw his stick away and closed his knife. It made a sound like a gun hammer clicking back. "All right, boss," he answered truculently. "We'll stick with you. Now, fer Pete's sake, let's stow the tongue oil and hit the hay!"

The ranchman swallowed hard, his temper dampened down by his foreman's conciliating words. He looked at Bicknell where he stood quietly, his still face stained red by the falling sun. "No hard feelin's, Bick, I hope."

Bicknell shook his head. "Not any, Fred."

"Look," Torvester said, "I'm goin' to stay with the boys tonight. Will you ride back to Halfaday and tell Hannah I won't be home? And tell her to get the house ready for the round-up dance tomorrow afternoon. We finish here by noon."

"Sure. You want me to ride back in the mornin'?"

"No," the ranchman said uncomfortably. "We don't need yuh here."

Bicknell grinned sardonically. "I see."

He threw away his cigarette and moved off without another word, tramping to where his sorrel stood with his eyes closed and his reins trailing out in front of him.

THE sun had been down an hour when Bicknell reached Halfaday Creek and cut into the canyon that gave out a mile beyond to the bench where the T-Dot buildings stood. The full moon was barely edging

up over the mesquite when his horse shied so violently it almost unseated him.

In that moment of sudden shock, Bicknell made a grab at the spot where his gun customarily hung. Then, not finding it, he hit home with his spurs, ducking sideways in the saddle. He was too slow. A rider who wore a flat-crowned hat snatched for his bridle rein. A gun went off with a tremendous bang in back of Bicknell, and the pale red flash of muzzle-flame revealed the shine of slitted eyes beneath the brim of the stranger's hat.

A second horseman rushed in from the left, yelling, "Grab him, Bill!"

A third man on foot made a quick throw with a rope. The hard rawhide plait slashed Bicknell across the eyes, blinding him momentarily. He jerked his own riata from the horn and swung it coiled at the face of the nearest man—the man on the left thrust out the barrel of a pistol and aimed a blow at Bicknell's head. The muzzle glanced off his temple stunningly, jarring Bicknell forward over his saddle horn. Frantically Bicknell laid about him with the coiled rope; his bridle rein jerked free. The sorrel reared up high, then plunged on up the shadow-tunneled trail.

Bicknell clung to the horn and roweled his horse. Another shot split the night. The bullet whanged into the mesquite ahead of the running horse. Voices yelled curses; hoofs drummed. Another shot came close afterwards. But the sorrel was running free.

Bicknell left the canyon finally and turned in on the angling wagon road, and passed through the gate into the T-Dot yard, pulling up a moment later before the house whose windows showed a glow of yellow light. A door opened and Nancy's rich, throaty voice called out, "Who's there?"

"It's me—Bicknell," he answered calmly. "Had a little trouble on the trail, and things are kind of goin' 'round."

The girl rushed out to help him as he slid down and clutched the horn. "Why, Ross, you're hurt!"

He gave a start of surprise as she spoke his name. "Not much, Nancy. Somebody slugged me in the head—I saw some stars."

Her arm was about him then, as compelling in its softness as in its tight young strength. Then Hannah Torvester appeared in the open door and cried, "What's wrong? Where's your father, Nancy?"

"He's still at the round-up, ma'am," Bicknell reassured her. "He's all right. Said to tell you he's stayin' with the boys tonight. Told me to ask you to get the house ready for the dance."

Inside the ranchhouse living room, Nancy grave-eyed but now thoroughly composed, made Bicknell lie down on the leather couch beside the fireplace. Hannah vanished silently,

then returned with a silky swish of black alpaca skirts. She brought a pan of hot water, then started to leave the room. "I'll put your horse in the corral," she said.

Bicknell rose on one arm, strenuously protesting, but she waved him firmly down again and left. "Where's Kippie at?" Bicknell wanted to know, as Nancy bathed and put a plaster on his gashed forehead.

"Abed," she told him very gently. There was something in her eyes for him and he tried to fathom it, and out of her quick confusion, Nancy said, "Who struck you, Ross?"

He shook his head. "Don't know for sure, but I've got a hunch and I'm goin' to put my chips on it."

She tied the bandage with fingers that trembled just a bit. "Your gun," she murmured presently, "is still hanging behind the kitchen door."

He pinned his steady gaze on her hot, flushed face. "Nancy, I promised your father I'd leave it there, and I won't break my word to him."

"Does that really matter?" She forced herself to look at him.

Bicknell's answer was softly challenging: "Mind cuttin' the deck a little deeper, Nancy?"

"Your life," she whispered, "should matter more."

He lifted to one elbow, saying in his low soft drawl, "I fear no man. But I'm plumb glad you feel that way."

She held her dark eyes steadfastly on his eager face. "You are a strange one, Ross."

He remained half on, half off the couch. "I've been restless, Nancy, that's true, and lookin' for something and not quite knowin' what it was. But I've found it now. And you can bet your last cartwheel on it!"

She laughed softly at this gambler's phrase he used even while vowing to reform. Bicknell started to argue, to protest indignantly, then suddenly joined her in the laugh. He took her hand and held it tight, and she did not try to draw it from his grasp.

BY NOON of the day following Bicknell's fight with Ford Ramsey on Dogie Flats, the round-up was finished; the branding done and the cattle settlement between the several outfits attended to. For many days all hands—or most of them—had looked ahead to the round-up dance which was scheduled to be given at Torvester's T-Dot spread, and which would last from three in the afternoon until the following dawn, if the crowd could last that long. The cost of food and entertainment was to be shared by the ranchers participating in the fall round-up. And when the *baile* was over, the great trail drive would start, ending weeks later at the shipping pens in Washita.

By three o'clock on that bright October day, a throng had already arrived at Halfaday: cowhands, wranglers, rep men, ranchmen and their dowdy wives and skinny kids. It looked as peaceful around the T-Dot yard as a day in town with a camp meeting going on. The ground between the bunkhouse, stable, blacksmith shop and horse corrals was banked solid with buckboards, spring wagons, buggies and tethered saddle ponies. Here and there around the big barbecue pits squatted bland-faced men in knots of three or four or five, talking in quiet tones, swapping gossip and an occasional smuggled flask of popskull rye.

A few of Ford Ramsey's punchers had drifted in. These men hunkered down apart from the other boys, as harmless looking as deacons on a church picnic, except that they kept a constant, guarded watch on the kitchen door through which Ross Bicknell had strode sometime before to help Nancy and her mother and the women cooks. The pleasant racket of pots and pans lifted through that open kitchen door; the aroma of baking breads and rolls and pies wafted out on the hot still air.

At half past three Bicknell strolled out on the kitchen gallery to roll and smoke a cigarette and pass the time of day with a couple of Box-B hands. Bicknell had his sleeves rolled up above the elbows of his muscular bronzed arms; his high cheekbones seemed tighter than usual against the sun-roughened skin of his somber face.

When Bicknell stepped out into the sun's long, slanting rays, the four Bell hands rose automatically and moved away through the maze of rigs and wagons and saddle ponies, fading presently from view. If Bicknell noticed their odd behavior, he paid no heed to it and gave no sign of curiosity, but went on palavering with his friends.

Other tardy guests arrived in noisv eagerness; and a continuous cloud of dust hung above the low-lying 'dobe buildings. The liveliest room in the big house was patently the kitchen, with joking men rawhiding one another and hindering the cooks instead of helping them. By quarter to four the crowd began to straggle bashfully into the broad, high living room, cleared now of furniture and rugs.

Fred Torvester waited until the room filled up, then stepped importantly out to the middle of the polished floor. "Friends!" His voice, always at its best in gatherings like this, boomed back from the beams as solemn as from the rafters of a church. "Y'all are welcome in this house. Eat, dance and make merry, if you're so inclined. T-Dot belongs to you." He bowed, very impressive in black box coat and stovepipe pants, with his beard combed out and as red as fire. Everybody cheered and stamped and clapped their hands.

But the silence that came down immediately

afterwards was as sepulchral as it was unexpected. Somebody whispered near the gallery door, and that was the only sound. Then boots scraped on the porch. Spurs jingled over the rough pine boards, and through the doorway came Ford Ramsey, his head thrown back arrogantly, a belligerent thrust to his blunt clean-shaven jaw. His eyes—one now faintly rimmed with a rich blue-black—were as bright and hard as ochre-colored glass.

The crowd moved hastily aside as Ramsey advanced. Then Bob McClune sang out, "Clear the floor, ladies and gents! 'Hoedown' Hanley, the caller, is takin' over."

Nobody noticed Ross Bicknell where he stood unobtrusively, close to the kitchen door. Neatly washed and brushed and combed, he stood motionless as an Indian.

Across from him, poised tensely against the yonder wall, stood Nancy Torvester, a look of imploring terror on her delicately featured face, and Bicknell dropped his arms and turned, fading through the kitchen door as silently as he had come. The girl, watching him all this time, broke away from the crowd and started after him with a rush.

"Salute yore pardners!" Hoedown cried.

Fiddlers and fiddlers' boots began to move. Their time picked up, and they were swinging with gusto almost at once. The crowd, screwing its courage up, was inching toward the center of the big long room.

*Swing yore pardner 'round an' 'round;
Pocket full o' rocks tuh hold me down. . .*

In the patio and in the living room, men's boots and ladies' high-topped button shoes began shuffling. Couples were bowing, sashaying, grabbing hands, turning, spinning, whirling up and down.

*Ducks in the river a-goin' tuh the ford,
Coffee in a lil' rag, sugar in a gourd. . .*

Out on the kitchen gallery stood Ross Bicknell and Preacher Fred. The rancher was speaking in a bitter, accusing voice: "I hate a liar, Bick! Didn't you promise me yuh'd leave your gun hang up till yuh finished here?"

Bicknell built, licked and lit a cigarette, letting the ranchman wait for his reply. "Fred," he finally said, "if somebody took my gun down off that peg he done it without me knowin' it. If you think I'm lyin' now, well, you can go to—"

Torvester was nonplussed. He stared bewilderedly for a long, still moment. Then he softened the sternness of his eyes and said, "Mebbe one o' the boys done it—mebbe Shawn took it down to the bunkhouse with the rest. I—I'm plumb sorry, Bick—"

Bicknell absently waved the apology away. He inhaled smoke, then blew it out, and said, "Ramsey's here. He's wearin' a hideaway. You goin' to get rid of him 'fore a ruckus starts?"

Torvester leaned wearily against a gallery post. "Oh, I'll take care of Ford." A dejected expression crawled over his bearded face. "Bick, I'm a ruined man. Busted—unless I c'n scrape up a lot more cows 'fore I have to pay that loan! And if the cows ain't out there on Dogie Flats, then they ain't gonna be found nowhere!"

Bicknell eyed him without pity, coldly, deliberately. "I told you where your stuff went to, but you stopped me dead. I've said all I'm goin' to say."

Torvester glumly shook his head, a sadness in his light blue eyes. "I know—I know. But, Bick, I can't condone accusin' any man o' bein' a cow thief less'n I got proof. And I won't stand for a gunfight, even if I lose everything I got!"

"You're thinkin' of yourself," Bicknell reminded him, "and forgettin' your family."

Torvester brought a sigh up from his boots. He squinted hard toward where the blood-red sun was sinking slowly toward the gilded peaks, forty miles away. "I've thought o' that, Bick," he said at last. "But I jest can't seem to reconcile—"

At that instant a slender figure came running up from the horse corrals. Nancy's hair was in disarray.

"Ross!" She gasped. "You've got to go somewhere—away from here! You've got to ride! Ben Johnson just got in from town and he says there's a marshal heading here to arrest you on a murder charge! Three men he says you killed in Navidad!"

THE fiddles were scraping wildly in the living room; there was the steady rhythmic stomping of feet keeping time to the dour-faced caller's chant. Preacher Fred stood over against the wall across from the kitchen door, his face vacant and staring. Over the bobbing heads of the dancers, a blandly grinning face showed for a moment, then turned away. The boss of Bell was dancing with Nancy Torvester and thoroughly enjoying it.

The square dance ended suddenly and the fiddlers went into a swaying waltz. Ramsey moved past Torvester with Nancy in his arms. The girl was suffering—her face was drawn and pale. Once she tried to pull away from Ramsey, but he held her tight and laughed. He had been drinking some, but not enough to dull his wits. Rather, it had honed them up to a razor edge.

Near the kitchen door Hannah Torvester suddenly appeared, poised and tall and austere

as she looked around. She saw Nancy and Ramsey almost at once, and caught her husband's eye and nodded toward the dancing pair. But the ranchman only shrugged and spread his hands and kept staring at nothing much at all.

Hannah pulled aside as someone behind her touched her arm. Ross Bicknell stepped into the crowded, noisy room and stopped, his cold eyes encompassing the scene. He kept standing there as the music played and the waltzers glided back and forth. His gaze, intent, pin-sharp in its scrutiny, followed Ramsey and Nancy about the room, never wavering away from them. The moments passed and then, without warning, Bicknell started deliberately out across the floor.

A few dancers noticed the look on his stolid face and caught on. Promptly they shied away and faded up against the wall. The floor cleared swiftly after that first stampede, and Ramsey and Nancy were left alone like two people on an island with the tide run out. The music dragged, dwindled and finally quit; and tension piled up in the room. No one stepping into this place could possibly have mistaken what was about to happen here. And room by room, the whole ranchhouse absorbed the eerie hush.

Bicknell crossed the deserted floor. He took his time, moving with short, stilted steps, the gait of a man on high-heeled boots. Those boots made hard sharp clicks on the polished wood. He stopped in front of Ramsey and the frightened girl. "Take your hands off Nancy," he said, mildly, blandly.

Ramsey's smile seemed frozen on his face. His grip on the girl relaxed, and she swiftly slid out of his arms and backed away. Ramsey waited, hardly seeming to breathe. Bicknell stood straight, motionless, calm. He said in the same soft tone, "Ramsey, you ain't havin' a good time here. Why don't you go where you can drink?"

A dry, savage sound which might have passed for a laugh left the Bell man's lips. Then, slowly, the hot blood stormed into his face and a vein at his temple throbbed and pulsed. He said, in a tone so soft that no one within ten feet of him could possibly have heard it, "Go get your gun. I'll wait for you."

Bicknell's wooden expression didn't change. "Maybe I've got one for all you know."

"Draw it," Ramsey breathed. "Draw it—and do it fast!"

Bicknell's face split in a tight, pleased grin. "No hurry, Ramsey. I got lots of time." His eyes went flat. "What are you sweatin' for?"

A tremor rippled over Ramsey's putty-colored face. The bulge beneath his coat was visible, but he made no move towards it. He stood his ground and let the awful seconds run.

Then Bicknell softly jeered, "Not in the

back like your rowdies tried to do last night! Right here!" He jerked his empty right hand up to his left side where the strings of his tobacco sack hung out of his top vest pocket. "Make it quick, friend! Make it clean!"

Nancy Torvester, crouching near, moaned: "No, Ross—no—"

The concerted breath of the crowd ran out sighingly. Fred Torvester stood back against the wall as pale as death under his scrubby sorrel beard. A woman screamed chokingly. Then it happened. The quick tread of booted feet came from the patio. The crowd swayed back to clear the way for whoever was coming now. And then Kip Torvester marched in, doggedly heading toward Bicknell who risked a lightning glance at the kid who had dared to interfere where grown men shrank away. The boy was white-lipped and tense; his eyes burned excitedly. He had an object in his hands which he extended toward Bicknell like an offering. It was Bicknell's belt and gun!

"I guess," the kid said in his deepest voice, "you're a-goin' to be needin' this."

But before the crowd sensed what had happened here, before they could draw a breath, another pair of boots whacked the gallery outside. A rider with a blood-stained rag around his head broke into the living room, shattering all that silence with his raucous voice:

"Come on, you antelopes! The herd's been jumped! Stackhouse and Mennafie got killed and the herd's been busted clean to hell!"

Men started running between Ramsey and Bicknell even before the echo of that shout died down. Kip Torvester was buffeted around the floor and knocked aside in the frantic scramble to separate the bristling men, but not before Bicknell had grabbed his gun and belted it around his waist. Other men went piling out to the gallery, heading for the bunkhouse and their artillery. The yard echoed to the pound of boots, with the sound of whirring spurs. Shouts, curses, lifted above the flat tile roofs. Even the fiddlers left their instruments and went loping energetically for their guns.

Saddles were whipped down off the corral rail; and the round-up dance broke up in pandemonium. In the confusion, Ford Ramsey disappeared. He was not missed; no one saw him surreptitiously mount and ride away, and no one cared where he had gone. It was as though the chaparral had opened up and swallowed him.

A PARTY of some forty men were a-saddle now. Hoofs thundered in the yard and on the trail. All hands left T-Dot Ranch in a long, running column, with Ross Bicknell up ahead and Fred Torvester riding at his stirrup. They hit the walled-in canyon with the racket of cavalry on the charge,

struck Halfaday Creek full tilt, riving white water in the air. Out in the open finally, they pointed their course for Dogie Flats, pouring hoof thunder back through the hemming hills.

As they approached the holding spot some time later, what was left of the herd was scattered for miles around, hidden in arroyos and deep-slashed draws, lost in the jungles of rock and brush. It would take days for the round-up crew to gather the cattle on the Flats again.

Bicknell led the rest in close to the holding spot. They found the bullet-riddled bodies of Stackhouse and Mennafie. And they found a mess of cattle tracks that told them nothing but that the herd had scattered to the four points of the compass. Where the rustlers had driven their haul was anybody's guess.

The party circled wide, sweeping the Flats from east to west, then turning southward in the direction of the Mule Jaw Range. There was no sign of the missing steers, and Bicknell finally called a halt.

Preacher Fred stood up in his stirrups, a big man on a big horse, and one with a big, earth-shaking voice. "Hold fast!" he boomed. "Whoever cut the herd had an hour's start. I figure they've headed east!"

Horses milled and bucked; the plain echoed to the jangle of saddle gear and swearing men. McClune and Shawn rode out of that ruck of mounted men. "Look here, Fred," McClune said, facing the ranchman, a challenge on his deep-red face. "Who's goin' to rod this posse now? There's only one man that's called the turn o' the cards right every time! And that's Ross Bicknell, here!"

Preacher Fred wore a distressed look, but cried impatiently, "Why, that's all right with me!"

"No, you take it, Fred," Bicknell said. But the red-bearded ranchman only shook his head.

"It's a young man's job, unless you'd rather not handle it now," Torvester said. "I wouldn't blame yuh none—"

Bicknell cut in, "All right." He rested his forearms on his saddle horn. "We'll split up, boys. Shawn, you take ten men and hit for Injun Springs. Fred, you ride with the rest and circle east, then cut back south again. McClune and I'll meet you below the Silverhorn. Wait a minute!" He held up a hand as the men prepared to dash away, waited stoically until he had their attention once again. "This is an order, boys. There'll be no lynchins' if we ketch up with 'em. Anybody that don't like that, can ride on home right now!"

There were a few dissents, but all finally agreed. Fred Torvester said to Bicknell then, "Yuh got my blessin' on that, son."

Bob McClune's grulla crowded Bicknell's sorrel as they struck through a hole in the brush. Bob said, "Bick, this here's one time yuh gotta use that gun o' yours!"

Bicknell grinned, "Ain't you usin' yours?" "Hell, yes! Me an' my ol' smoke-pole have been on a high lonesome long enough!"

"Fine," Bicknell replied.

"You figure they went this way?"

"We'll see. We'll be cuttin' the trail within the hour if they headed south."

They rode on at a distance-eating pace.

Every important cattleman in Cajon County was in the saddle that afternoon, riding grimly through the brush now redly lit by the fall sunset. And there was no time to be wasted at this stage. The herd which had been run off by the rustlers was large enough to be unwieldy; and the outlaws who were driving it might cut out the choicest beef and get out of the country at a faster pace.

After a half hour's push, McClune pulled up and hard and called, "Bick, here's their blasted trail!"

It was plain enough, even in the rapidly fading light. The trail of the steers angled into the deep southwest, toward Silverhorn Creek and the hard-rock country that abutted Black Rock Desert farther on. Now Bicknell and McClune took up the chase, certain they would eventually overhaul the driven herd. Every ten minutes, Bicknell called a halt and let the horses blow for a little while. During these stops, he listened for the sound of cattle ahead, but the herd was still many miles away.

At seven o'clock, Bicknell reined up in a deep drywash and swung down to remove his saddle. "Hobble your horse, Bob," he ordered. "We'll rest till the moon comes up."

CHAPTER FOUR

Rampage

AT EIGHT, with an immense full moon edging up over the chaparral, Bicknell roused the foreman, and they saddled up and hit the trail. Bicknell had not slept a wink; nevertheless his temper was even throughout the next two hours.

The stakes were plenty high this night. There were a dozen brands in that stolen herd, along with some of the cattle Preacher Fred needed to save his ranch. They rode steadily, resting at regular intervals, as they had before. At nine o'clock, hoofs ruffled the earth beyond a low ridge to the northeast, and a party of ten riders came quartering down to the spot where Bicknell and the foreman sat ready for anything. A voice lifted in the bright moonlight: "Hey, Bick! It's Shawn! Ye Gods, man, yuh made racket enough comin' down that slope a while ago!"

"Never mind the racket," Bicknell called. "Come on!"

They made four or five miles quickly, riding

(Continued on page 127)

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 103)

BUCKAROOS and tenderfeet, top hands and greenhorns, here's your chance to show your knowledge of cowpunchers, range life, and the West in general. Try your skill at answering the twenty questions listed below. When you finish, total up your score of correct answers. By vaquero standards here's how you rate: 19 or 20 correct, top hand; 17 or 18 correct, buckaroo; 15 or 16 correct, tenderfoot.

That's your tally sheet, *amigos*. Best of luck!

1. One of the following terms is not a Western slang expression for English saddle. Which one? Hogskin. Postage stamp. Cut-back.

2. Match up the following Western slang expressions with the proper equivalents:

Drylander..... To cheat or gyp
Double shuffle..... Pugnacious drinker
Dehorn..... A farmer of irrigated land
Dig..... Change in bucking.

3. If an old time Westerner offered you some moonshine, you would: Put some water on the stove to boil? Go get a jug? Tell him that you really have very little interest in astronomy? Attempt to borrow a telescope?

4. If you owned a *rosadero*, you would: Wear it in your hat? Give it to the horse to eat? Sleep on it? Use it to tell time with?

5. True or false? There is an old Western superstition to the effect that, if a cowpuncher is thrown from one bucking horse, chances are he will be thrown from three before his bad luck runs out.

6. Which would you rather be, a *segundo* or a *pratie*?

7. What is the meaning of the miner slang term, dough-boxer?"

8. A "splinter belly" is a: Carpenter? Porcupine? Hedgehog? A variety of cactus? One who has been thrown from a horse into a patch of sage brush?

9. If a cowpuncher's horse steps into a prairie dog hole, what is this supposed to foretell?

10. If it was Saturday night and you were planning to ride to town to celebrate, where would you put your newest and best *freno*?

11. "Dashboard" is a Western slang term for a certain portion of human anatomy. The anatomy referred to is the: Foot? Head? Hand? Arm? Shoulder?

12. One of the following items is not an article of clothing. Which one? Hardhat? Serape? Snoozer?

13. True or false? The cowpuncher slang term for automobile is "scrongo"?

14. Match up the following Western terms with their correct animal equivalents:

Sleeper A calf, unbranded but earmarked.

Arizona dragon.... Gila monster.

Dogy..... Weak yearling calf.

15. Back in the old buckskin days what was the meaning of the expression, "epossum salts"?

16. Why did gamblers in the old West often carry a small gold stud in the boot or shoe?

17. What is the matter with a horse that is said to have become "saged"?

18. If someone told you that the new tenderfoot at the ranchhouse was being "rawhided," what would you think was happening to him?

19. True or false? A "loose herd" is a herd of cattle that has become lost.

20. True or false? A "hooligan" is a twist of the lariat that makes the rope stand in almost an upright position.

TALES of the

by LEE

PILGRIMAGE of DEATH



IN THE SPRING OF 1846, LESS THAN 100 YEARS AGO, CAPT. ROBERT DONNER WITH 90 MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN A WELL-EQUIPPED COVERED WAGON TRAIN--THE SECOND TO RISK THE ATTEMPT--SET OUT FROM THE JUMPING-OFF PLACE IN MISSOURI AND BEGAN THE HAZARDOUS TREK THROUGH TRACKLESS, INDIAN-INFESTED PRAIRIES, WATERLESS DESERTS, VIRGIN FORESTS AND SNOW-SHROUDED MOUNTAINS TO THE FERTILE LANDS OF CALIFORNIA.

DONNER HOPED TO MAKE IT BEFORE THE FIRST SNOWS, BUT FROM THE BEGINNING ILL LUCK AND MISFORTUNE DOGGED THE EXPEDITION.

INDIANS SNIPED AT SCOUTS AND FORAGERS, AND FINALLY ATTACKED THE CUMBERSOME PRAIRIE SCHOONERS THEMSELVES.

FAULTY DIRECTIONS SENT THEM ON A ROUNDABOUT WAY THROUGH THE DESERT, WATER GAVE OUT AND THIRST-MADDENED OXEN STAMPEDED AWAY, NEVER TO BE FOUND. SOME OF THE LESS HARDY IMMIGRANTS DIED THERE BUT THE REST ABANDONED MUCH OF THEIR EQUIPMENT AND STRUGGLED ON.



— OLD WEST

EARLY AND HEAVY SNOW HAD ALREADY FALLEN WHEN THEY REACHED THE GRIM SIERRAS. DIRECTIONS WERE AGAIN MISSED AND THE TRAIL LOST. A FIGHT STARTED OVER WHOSE WAGON HAD THE RIGHT OF WAY UP A STEEP GRADE AND JOHN SNYDER DIED OF A KNIFE WOUND.



WHEN THE HEAT OF THE FIRE AROUND WHICH THEY SLEPT MELTED THE SNOW, A FAMILY AWOKE TO FIND THEMSELVES AT THE BOTTOM OF AN ICY PIT. RISKING DEATH UNDER AN AVALANCHE AT EVERY STEP, THEY AT LAST HEWED A STAIRWAY TO THE SURFACE.

JAMES F. REED AND ANOTHER MAN VOLUNTEERED TO GO AHEAD TO SUTTER'S FORT FOR PROVISIONS BUT A BLIZZARD KEPT RESCUE PARTIES AWAY AND MAROONED THE REST AT DONNER LAKE, HIGH UP AMONG THE PEAKS.



FOOD RAN OUT AS THEY HUDDLED THERE IN MAKESHIFT HUTS. THEY ATE THE REMAINING OXEN, THEN STEWED THE HIDES. A NEST OF FIELD MICE PROVIDED AN UNEXPECTED BANQUET. MANY DIED OF STARVATION AS THE FRIGHTFUL WINTER WORE ON.

RELIEF PARTIES FINALLY WON THROUGH TO THEM, PACKED THE WEAKEST OUT ON THEIR BACKS AND HELPED THE OTHERS TO SAFETY. ONLY 5 MEN, 8 WOMEN AND 32 CHILDREN SURVIVED THE DANGERS AND HARDSHIPS OF THAT EPIC OF HEROISM UNEQUALLED IN THE HISTORY OF OUR GREAT WILD WEST.



RAWHIDE RENEGADE



A man was staked to the ground, arms and legs tied to bullhorns. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Hell's Buzzard

JOHNNY WEBB jumped his big gelding onto the talus slope, and stiff-legged it down, with high-held reins. He was making it nicely, too, until his lead horse whipped his nose down, all at once, and turned a complete somersault, from head to tail and back

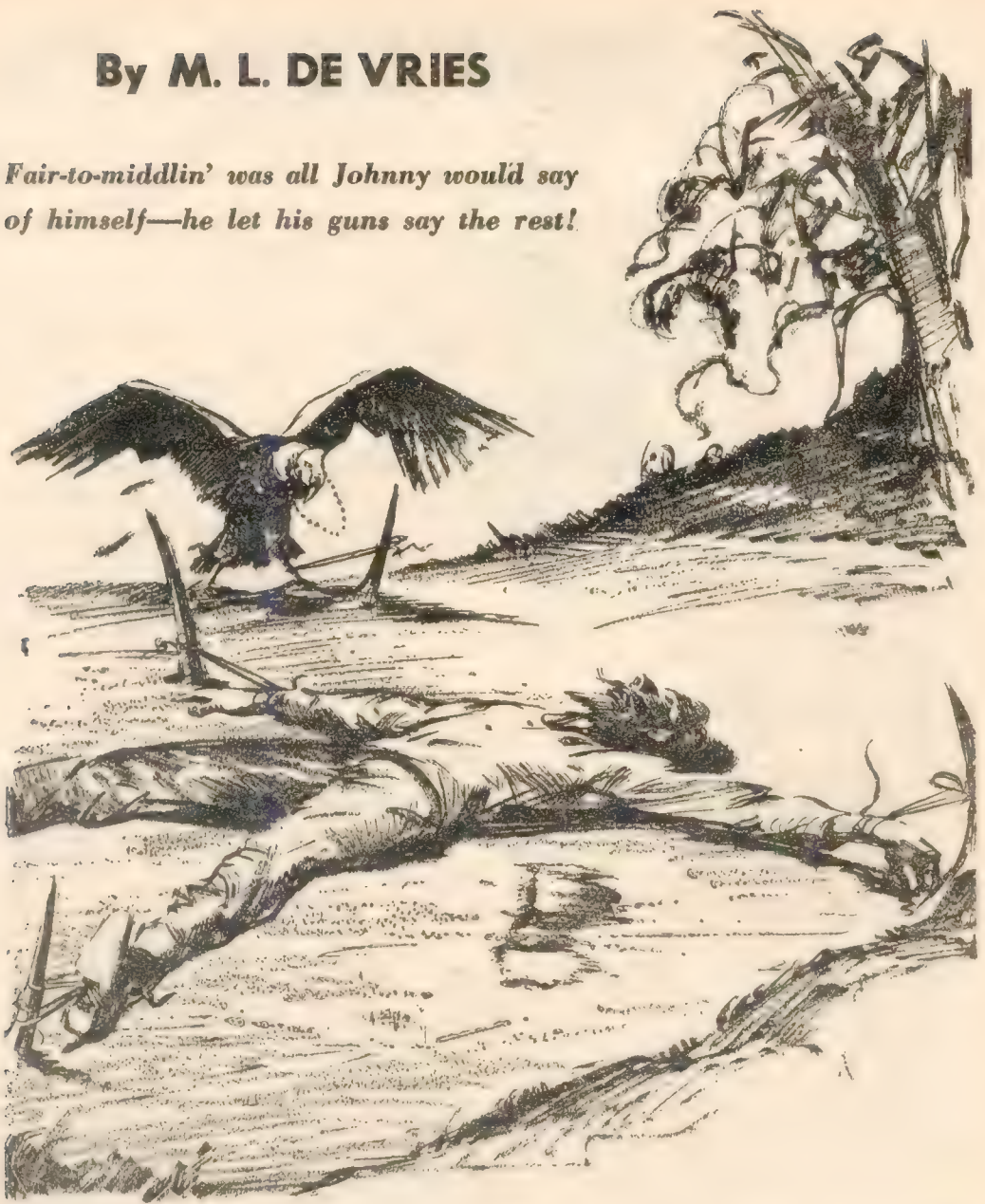
again, with enough noise to wake the dead.

"You infernal old idiot," Johnny grumbled, viewing the tangle of broken gear, the pack gone askew and the rasped hide. "Why don't you just go some'ere and break yore neck, once an' for all. Addle-pated old rannikin! You got me lost in the first place, back yonder, gettin' boogered by a grasshopper."

The fool wall-eye nickered back, like he'd really accomplished something.

By M. L. DE VRIES

Fair-to-middlin' was all Johnny would say of himself—he let his guns say the rest!



"Don't back-talk me," Johnny snapped. "It ain't any joke—"

That was, indeed, a fact. Johnny didn't know exactly where he was, but that stretch of far-horizoned land between Dodge City and Red River Station was rough, dangerous country, every inch of it, no matter where he might be. Scalping Injuns, renegade scum of the frontier, killer outlaws! A man couldn't take an easy breath from end to end. But Johnny

was Pecos-bound, from Dodge, and he kept his eye on that far land.

The talus rubble gave way to a stretch of sloping ground that ended in some willow mottes and tules in the distance. It looked like a nice safe place to make camp, but, before he got there, the wall-eye spooked again at something he saw on the ground, and when Johnny looked for himself, he realized that, for once, it was no big wonder. It was a sight that

would have spooked anybody. It did Johnny.

A man was staked out on the ground there like a tent, arms and legs tied to four old bull horns driven in the ground. A live buzzard was tied to the same kind of a stake nearby. It had a bead doodad around its neck that tinkled like thin glass when it turned its head. It was a pretty sound, but it sent a sudden shiver up and down Johnny's spine, and the wall-eye shook like a falling tree.

Johnny got down, and cut the rawhide thongs. They had probably been applied wet, because they were tight as fiddle strings now, and the man was slowly but surely getting himself pulled limb from limb. There was an inch strip of the stuff around his head, too, to squeeze his brains out.

The man had a wide, full chest, and a lean belly. His gray hair was stiff and wiry, and probably had once been coal black. An iron-gray beard was cut off straight across at the bottom, as if one stroke of a knife had done it. He didn't open his eyes when Johnny got some water between his lips, but he flexed his fingers, and carefully drew in his arms. Finally, he began to cuss, and he didn't sound half as dead as he looked.

When he finally did open his eyes, and got a look at Johnny, he said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

"Just take it easy," Johnny told him.

HIS tongue picked off the dribblets of water around his mouth, and Johnny poured in some more. "I wasn't goin' to look," he sputtered between gurgles. "I thought you was a damn' Comanche."

"Is this their work?"

"Don't it look it! That damn' bird sittin' there. It'd take an Injun to think that up."

"We better git out o' here."

The man nodded, and tried to sit up, but he couldn't make it. Johnny finally got him on the gelding, and led him into the willow motte, where he broke through a heavy stand, and put him down again. "Damned rough goin'," the man muttered, feelingly. "Hell of a predicament for a man to git himself into, ain't it."

"You look like you might'a been there quite a spell."

"More'n a week, I guess."

"Seems as though you might be dead."

"It was a fierce thing all right. I hurt more right now, though, than when I was gittin' stretched apart."

"Mebbe you're drawin' together again, an' you got used to the other direction."

"Sounds reasonable. Have you got any good liquor?"

"I got a pint bottle, that's all. I don't drink much. I had it in case of emergency."

"I think that's what we got here, son." He

took a long drink while Johnny held the bottle. "If you hear anything pop, it'll be my head splittin' open, not the bottle."

A remark like that, coming from a man who by rights ought to be half-dead, at least, made Johnny laugh, even though his stomach was all twisted up at what he saw. "You say they were Comanches?"

The other nodded. "There's nothin' a Comanche wouldn't do to a Tejano. Buffalo Horn concocted it. He would fix up a Tejano with a lot of damned rawhide. He's got the two mixed up together in his brain—an' what you saw back there came out."

"Do they hang out around here close?"

"They got a village down the creek a piece. Every once in a while they come around, an' wet down the rawhide so it lets up, an' then starts all over again. I got the full treatment all right."

"What was the buzzard for?"

"Whettin' up his appetite, I guess. He's Buffalo Horn's medicine, so nobody dared touch me. By the way, my name's Tark Fire."

Johnny started. "Tark Fire! From the Fire-brand, on the Pecos?"

The other nodded. "That's me."

Johnny looked closer. "Sure enough. You know me?"

"Seems as if I should, but I got burrs in my eyes."

"I'm Johnny Webb. We used to be your neighbors down there."

"Hell, yes. Pass Webb's boy. Kin you beat that. You're a Tejano yoreself. Don't tangle with no Comanches, son, that's all I kin say."

"I don't aim to."

"How's Pass?"

Johnny's face shadowed. "He's dead."

Tark Fire winced, as if he had gotten a blow. "I don't like to hear that. He should've stayed down on the Pecos."

"He got high-financed out of his place down there, an' lost his spunk."

"By that damn' Tegel feller. He'd high-finance his grandmaw out of six cents. He tried it on me. I finally pulled out my account, an' told him to go to hell fer good. That's half the reason I'm in this predicament here."

"Pop wasn't fixed to tell him anything, but I aim to be, some day, an' I'll tell him good. Pop never did git his spirit back."

"I plumb lost track of him," Tark Fire said, regretfully.

"We lived in Dodge a spell. He was always handy fixin' guns, an' he started up a place there. That's how come he got killed."

"Tell me about it."

"There ain't much to tell. He wouldn't take a job of fixin' a gun for a tough hombre, an' this feller shot him down. I saw it. That was three years ago. I—was just a button, I guess. I stayed around, figurin' I'd run into that

fombre again, but I never did. Now, I'm headin' back to the Pecos, to start up where he left off."

"Like me," Tark Fire declared, wryly. "I been headin' back a year now."

"That's a long time. You didn't git so far,"

"I got all tangled up in this place. Then those damn' Comanches took me, an' I been a prisoner. The only thing that saved my scalp was some renegades made a dicker with 'em. They paid Buffalo Horn wohaws for doin' that to me." He nodded at his wrists. "I cached some cattle money before I was took. They knowed it, the renegades did. Buffalo Horn don't give a damn for money so long as he kin git wohaws. That's why he hung onto me as long as he did. I was a paying proposition. But they didn't find out nothin', not yet."

Johnny looked up, because, all at once, the zip went out of Tark Fire's voice, and his face got long as a gun-barrel. "Let's see," he went on, finally, "you're just my Molly's age, ain't you?"

"Yeah," Johnny answered. "We used to play an' rld together when I was a button, down there."

"I remember. You know, she never got over your leavin'."

JOHNNY flushed with sheer pleasure and half, or all of the reason he was heading for the Pecos again lay there between them like an open book. But Tark Fire only sighed, and gave Johnny a careful look from head to foot as if he were seeing him once again in knee pants, playing on the green grass in the ranch yard. Which was exactly what he was doing. And wishing that, instead of a button like Johnny, someone had come along who could measure up to the job that was ahead of them. He wasn't foolish enough to think they were shed of Buffalo Horn and his bucks. Not by a hundred miles. And he knew he was played out for a spell.

A man with gun savvy might probably get them out of the tight, but long pants didn't make a button into a man. It was a disappointment, and it showed in his face, for an unguarded moment.

Johnny saw it. *He don't know I've growed up*, Johnny thought, suddenly. *He thinks he's got to wet-nurse me through this, an' he don't see how he kin do it. He's glad I'm here, but he'd rather it was somebody else.*

In his mind, he tried to measure out the job it would be. It would take a long time for Tark Fire to get his joints working smoothly again. His wrists looked closest thing to a double-barreled breadloaf he had ever seen. There was fester and corruption in them, and the man might go off his head, if it got any worse. He thought probably the thing to do was to rest the horses till dark, and then put

some distance between them and the Injun village.

Tark nodded to the suggestion. "That damn' old reprobate'll miss me. He liked to come up there and sit by his buzzard an' watch me squirm."

"We'll pull out by early dark."

Tark Fire squinted at him sideways. "You know, son, you could go farther alone."

"I don't aim to try," Johnny answered shortly.

Tark Fire shrugged. "How you fixed for weapons?"

"The saddle gun up there, an' my holster gun, an' a sneak gun under my arm. I'm loaded for bear."

"I don't s'pose I could use any one of them," Tark Fire confessed. "My fingers don't track right. How do you make out with a shootin' iron?"

Johnny pursed his lips. "Fair to middlin'."

Tark's answer to that was in his eyes. *Not good enough, son. Not good enough, the tight we're in.*

Johnny let it stand that way. He had heard men boast of their skill, and fall down in a pinch. If what he could do wasn't good enough, it wouldn't help any to know about it beforehand, Johnny thought grimly. He looked up, intending to say something, and then, when he saw the look in Tark Fire's eyes, he spun around.

The willow motte made a good hideout. It had a small clearing in the center, with a thick screen of leaves around it, except on the creek side. But Buffalo Horn and three young bucks had gotten through it without a sound, and they came in mounted. They weren't more than twenty feet behind him. Buffalo Horn was fat as a barrel, with a greasy face, and shoe-button eyes. His buzzard was tied to a roost behind his saddle. He had a pearl-handled revolver in his hand. A rifle was strapped to his saddle, and a bow and quiver of arrows were slung over his shoulder. A beltful of ammunition was strapped around his fat middle. He spouted Spanish at a mile a minute at his three bucks, and they spread out in a semi-circle around him.

"You better let me palaver," Tark Fire said. "I savvy his lingo. I don't guess there'll be much to parley about, anyway."

"Not much, I reckon," Johnny agreed.

"You savvy Spanish?" Tark Fire asked.

"A little," Johnny admitted. "He's callin' us names right now."

"That pock-marked rattle-brain next to him is his get. His name's Yellow Claw. Watch him. He's meaner'n dirt, an' he's likely to make the first move. Watch out fer his rope. He learned some fancy stuff from a Spaniard on the Brazos, he claims, an' he likes to show it off."

Buffalo Horn broke in then with a splutter of abuse, pointing at his bird, and then pounding his chest, and leveling a finger at Tark. A buck dismounted, and took Johnny's rifle, and his holster gun.

After that, Buffalo Horn relaxed and slid his revolver back into his belt. Johnny's pulse began to pound. It looked like his fangs had been pulled, and that was what he wanted them to think. Now, he had half a chance.

Yellow Claw unlimbered his rope, and made a deft throw. Tark Fire apparently was going to get a rope ride back to the staking ground, unless Johnny did something about it. He watched the limber coils snake out, and draw taut. Then his sneak gun blasted, and the rope parted like it had been cut with a knife.

Johnny had hardly moved, no more than the twitch of a shoulder to show what he was doing. The rest was a blur, like the lash of a windmill blade in the sunlight. Yellow Claw reeled in the loose end of his rope. His jaw hung down over his neck. He didn't have the sense to go for his gun.

Tark Fire blinked every time Johnny's gun hammered down, five times in a split second. The two bucks dropped without getting off a shot. Yellow Claw finally pulled his wits together, and tried it, but a bullet whammed through him, and his gun went spinning. His long, bare legs see-sawed a second, his hands clawed air, and he threw himself clear of his rearing pony. If he wasn't dead when he hit the ground, he was instantly afterwards. He landed squarely on his head and his neck folded up like a jackknife.

A bullet Buffalo Horn got off snicked past Johnny's ear with a hot, whistling breath. But it didn't do the business it was built for. Johnny answered it with the same swift motion that had Tark Fire blinking, and one bullet finished off both Buffalo Horn and the buzzard on the roost behind him.

The echo of Johnny's fast shots rattled back and forth across the clearing for a moment and died. Tark Fire didn't move, but his grim eyes counted coup. In a dead silence, Johnny retrieved his rifle and holster gun, and grabbed a horse in the bargain. Then their eyes met for a solemn second, and Tark blinked again, as if he had seen a boy grow up into a man in a split second.

But all he said was, "I'm glad you got that damn' bird!"

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-sense

UP-CREEK, a far stretch from that place, Johnny Webb, and Tark Fire stopped their horses the next morning and wearily dismounted. Tark Fire did it like

a falling tree, and spent his breath cussing out Comanches again—but he landed on his feet and stayed there.

They hadn't talked much during the night. Tark hoorawed Johnny a little about that "fair to middling" shooting, and said it was fit and proper for a man to be humble in the sight of God, but it would have been almighty comforting to know beforehand what a man could do with a shootin' iron in the sight of Comanches. "Man, you could shoot fleas off a shepherd dog," he had declared.

Johnny said his father had drilled him from hell to breakfast with a gun ever since he could remember, but had always told him not to brag about it. "A tight lip always gives you the bulge," he used to tell me."

"Well, that was his way," Tark Fire agreed. "But he was never that good with a gun."

"Mebbe he never had four Comanches an' a buzzard to finish off." But Johnny knew it was good shooting, all the same, and he was glad he had been able to do it. It had certainly saved them their scalps and, besides, it had sparked Tark up again and that was what he needed most. Something to show they had a fighting chance to pull out of this tight. It eased his worries, and Johnny's own, too. If he had known what was in store for them, though, he might have started up a few new ones. . . .

"This is the place I been lookin' fer all night, Johnny," Tark stated. "I had a hunch we might overrun it, but this is it all right."

He still didn't say what in the wind, but took a bearing on a far point, lined it up with a nearby tree, and paced off exactly a hundred steps. Then he took another bearing, paced off another hundred steps, and sat down, winded.

"Dig there," he told Johnny.

Johnny stared at the spot. It didn't look any different than a million other places he might have picked out, but he seemed to know what he was doing, and Johnny began to dig.

"Makes a man feel plumb foolish, mebbe, diggin' a hole in the ground like that," Tark observed, "but go ahead, anyway."

Johnny worked out a hole a foot square, gouging out the dirt with the edge of a flat rock. Ten-twelve inches down, he hit a piece of tarp. Tark let his breath go. "I've heard say gold is where you find it. Haul her out, Johnny."

It wasn't gold, but it was a hell of a lot of currency in big denominations—a fistful of five hundred dollar bills, and a bigger fistful of one hundred dollar pieces, all stuffed into four leather money belts. The whole sum totaled forty thousand dollars.

Tark stared at it grimly for a second, then muttered, "A man's a damfool to go prowlin' around this country with that much money."

Ain't he?" He didn't look up as he said it. "I'd think so," Johnny agreed, his jaw still hanging.

"Well, I did it," Tark muttered. "An' I thought I was purty smart. Comes from havin' a rukkus with the banker down home. I guess you can't beat them hombres when it comes to a money deal. I don't know which is worse, havin' it in a hole in the ground, or in Tegel's bank in War Road. He's the town crook. He'd have beat me out of that money somehow. I could see it in his damn' ole weasel-eyes. So I wrapped myself up in this dinero when I got the herd sold off, an' headed fer home. But—things went wrong."

"You must've had a big drive," Johnny said, still gaping.

Tark nodded. "I bet I had twenty vented irons in that drive. Hell, I bought beef in all directions, an' mortgaged my shirt to do it. Mebbe you remember there was talk of puttin' a law through, so no Texas cattle could be drove to Dodge unless they wintered north of the Red. That was on account of the Texas fever. I figured I could beat that thing an' every buyer in Dodge would be hollerin' fer beef. That's the way it worked, too, an' I got a good price, but it ain't done me any good. I had to stick it in a hole in the ground. The Keller gang got on my trail. I think one of my boys throwed in with them renegades, a puncher by the name of Shag Shumway. He wanted I should pay him off in Dodge, an' I did. He didn't come back with us. I ain't sure of it, one way or another. But I knowed that gang was trailin' us, so one night I snuck out of camp an' put these money belts in this hole, figurin' I'd git 'em later. Damned if I didn't git jumped by them Comanches right then an' there, an' I didn't see hide nor hair of my outfit again."

"You'd think they'd set out to look f'r you."

"Sure they did, but they didn't find me."

"An' you figure that Keller bunch was payin' Buffalo Horn wohaws to make you talk?"

"I heard the dicker." He looked around. "Mebbe we better git movin'."

Johnny nodded, and stuffed the money back into the belts. "Great Ceasar! What a heap of money!"

"Half of it's yours, Johnny."

Johnny's mouth came open again. "Huh?"

"I say—half of it's yours."

"No."

"Now, listen, son, don't jaw me. I don't like no damn' fools. Take that money."

"But—"

playing out fast now. The last half pint of liquor kept him going for a while, but he finally started to get lightheaded and Johnny called a halt.

Tark Fire dismounted, but this time he couldn't handle his legs, and slid to the ground with a jolt that made his teeth rattle. "Dammit," he muttered in surprise. "I didn't go for to do that." He stayed where he was, sitting on the ground, alongside his fagged horse, and the two of them made a sorry sight.

Johnny got a blanket under him and fixed his saddle for a head-rest. Tark watched him with dull smoky eyes. Before he got it organized, a horse nickered up ahead, and the wall-eye had to answer it, of course. It brought Tark out of his spell for a moment. "That damn' hoss," he frowned.

The far horse nickered again, and this time an angry voice lashed out at him, as if the rider had the same worries Johnny and Tark faced, but a little later he came barging through the brush like he didn't care how much racket he made.

Tark gave him one look, and turned to Johnny. "It's that puncher," he remarked in an undertone. "Keep everything under yore hat." Then he raised his voice, and called, "Well, I'll be damned—Shag Shumway!"

Shag waved his hand. He was a knotty-looking character, bowlegged, tough and short, with a face that might have gone through a meat-grinder at some time or other, and that hid anything a man might try to see behind it. "That goes double for me, boss," he stated. "You like to scared me out of my wits."

"What're you doin' out here?"

Shag grinned sheepishly. "Headin' back to the Pecos, boss, back to the Firebrand, if you'll have me. I never did feel right about leavin' the outfit up there in Dodge. I was just fiddle-footed."

"Is that so?"

"You look kinda peaked, boss."

"I got a right to. I been Comanche bait for a year, till Johnny showed up."

"You mean to tell me you never did git home all that time?"

"I never did."

"With all that dinero you had on you, too?"

"I cached that, Shag."

"Out in this God-forsaken country?"

"That's right."

"Hell, we oughta git that back."

"We oughta. I ain't in very good shape, but—uh—mebbe we could pick it up between here an' the cattle trail, eh, Shag?" He gave Shag a broad wink.

"I see," Shag said. "Well, I'll be glad to help."

"That's nice, Shag. That's real nice." Tark turned to Johnny. "We kin use some help on that, eh, Johnny. There's a heap of it. . . ."

IT WAS a nice thing, sure enough, but Johnny meant to put up an argument about it later, when Tark Fire would be apt to have more sense. He kept a wary eye on his companion, and noticed that he was

For a second, his eyes darted warning fire, straight at Johnny. A few more words rumbled out, thick and heavy, and then he toppled over on his side like a log.

When Johnny got to him, he was limp as a rag and his eyes rolled in his head, and Johnny thought he was going to die, then and there. But his breath kept on coming, in short, flaming gusts, as if a raging fire were burning inside of him, and had to burst out somewhere. He was hot as a branding iron, and his hands were bloated out of shape, clear down to his fingernails.

"He's got one hell of a fever," Shag observed. "He's really burnin' up."

"He's apt to be a goner 'less we do something'."

"I wouldn't know what to do."

"Me neither. Mebbe those festered spots ought to be opened up."

"I wouldn't know."

"Mebbe he needs a good rest," Johnny said, hopefully. "That might do it."

"You know anything about that cache he was talkin' about?"

Johnny shook his head. "I knowed there was one. That's about all."

"I betcha that chick, Molly Fire, could sure use that dinero. We better find out where that place is, if there's any way of doin' it."

"He'll be all right in the mornin'."

As a matter of fact, Tark Fire did quiet down toward evening, and Johnny sure felt relieved. He was bone-weary from the long pasear, almost two days and a night of it, and he fell asleep at dark, Shag or no Shag. The money belts were a nuisance, but they didn't keep him awake.

Once, during the night, Tark Fire started off on another rampage, but it didn't last very long.

LATER still, he awoke again, but that time Tark didn't do it, because he wasn't making a sound. By the set of the moon, Johnny figured it was near midnight. Shag's horse was froze at the end of his picket line, staring into the dark. Johnny followed the look, and then for the first time noticed that Shag was gone.

He got up, and knuckled the daze out of his eyes. Shag's blanket was still warm. He hadn't been gone long, but the half-boogered horse, staring out like that, showed him in what direction he had gone. Johnny thought a moment, then followed him into the brush.

He had to cross a stretch of boggy ground, dappled with moonlight. It was so clear and bright he could see the trail Shag had made. He heard a horse stomp up ahead, and then he heard Shag's voice, cussing out Tark Fire. "Damned old goat's gonna croak, that's what I think," he was saying.

"You better find out about that cache before he does, Shag," another man said. "You just better."

Johnny counted eight men huddled in a circle around Shag, eight tough gunnies, who, like Tark Fire, talked a Texas drawl. Texans, they were—Tejano renegades.

Shag repeated what Tark had said about the cache. "Could be we gotta hole up right where we are a coupla days, though, if the old goat don't pull out of it, but I'll git him to talk some more, so in case he cashes in, we kin find the place."

"I've waited a year. Guess I can wait another day or two." That was a new voice, one that hadn't spoken before. It was smoother, glibber than the rest.

"We ain't long on waitin'," a raspy voice growled.

A thought struck Johnny, remembering that smooth voice—then he put it away. It ain't reasonable, Johnny thought, a banker conniving with a bunch of renegades in the middle of the Nations. But that was how it was. What he said next proved it.

"I aim to get that Firebrand place, and I don't want anything to go wrong this time. That's all I'm aiming at."

"You kin have the place. We'll take the cash."

"Fair enough, but be sure you get it. I don't want him to show up in War Road again, not at all, and sure not with that cash. I've prodded his hot-headed daughter into makin' another drive to Dodge. I don't want her to get any beef through. That'll ruin the outfit for good, and I can pick it up. That drive's crossed the Red, an' the North Fork, before the floods, so it'll show up here any day now. I got two men in her outfit I can rely on—Bix Shile, an' a puncher by the name of Pancho. The same way you worked, Shag. They'll throw in with the rest of us when the proper time comes."

"Okay, Tegel—you git the ranch. We git the cash, an' the herd. But which one of us gits the girl?"

"I do," Shag put in, suddenly.

"The hell you do," another protested. "I've been figurin' on that ever since the old man showed up with the news."

Johnny started at the sound of the voice. He couldn't believe that, either, but it sounded just like the voice of the man who had killed his father, back in Dodge City. He had forced himself to remember it, rehearsing the memory of it every day of his life so that, if he ever heard it again, he would know.

He got a good, hard look at the face, then, there in the moonlight—the loose mouth, the half-sprung jaw, the buck teeth, and then he back-tracked to camp.

He felt very thoughtful.

JUST before dawn, Tark Fire got another spell. Johnny hadn't slept much. Shag was back under his blanket, snoring. A gray light showed in the sky, trickling through the willows like mist. Tark's voice spilled out into the silence with a thick, muddy sound, building up into a fevered delirium that clawed at Johnny like a living hand.

He leaned over, and felt the fire raging through the old rancher. Then he struck a sulphur match, and touched it to the fire he had laid the evening before. "He's goin' to die," he told himself, "unless—" His stomach twisted into a knot, but he got out his knife, and held the blade over the open flame. "Shag, wake up! You gotta give me a hand here."

Shag joined him, and looked down at the twisting figure. "What you goin' to do?" Then he saw the knife in Johnny's hand and blanch a little in the firelight.

"You gotta hold him, Shag," Johnny said grimly.

He felt of the blade to see if it had cooled, and then set to work. Shag got down on his knees on the far side, and put his hands on Tark's shoulders. Tark squirmed, and fought him off, but as soon as he quieted down, Johnny set his teeth, and went ahead.

It was a hard job. Tark fought against it, tooth and nail. Shag couldn't hold him down. He tried to straddle him, but that didn't work either. Finally, though, Johnny got the wrists incised, lengthwise along the bloated area. Then he leaned back, and wiped the sweat from his set face.

Shag backed off on his knees, then hunkered back and brushed the dirt off his britches. Johnny took a walk around in a circle to get the sick feeling out of his stomach. But before he made the full circle, Tark suddenly sat up, and let out a loud roar, cussing and ranting, and claiming they were burning him up alive. He clawed at his throat, and then, before Johnny could stop him, he got hold of his shirt, and ripped it open from top to bottom. Then he fell back again.

Shag was closest to him. He probably saw the stuffed money-belts first, strapped around Tark's middle. He halted Johnny with a word, gun leveled. "You two been purty damn' smart, eh?"

Johnny didn't have a gun on him. His holster lay by his blanket, out of reach, and he had put his sneak gun by his saddle before he started to work on Tark. His only chance to stay alive much more than a split second was to play for time. He gave Shag a puzzled look. "You gone out of yore head, Shag?" he inquired. "What ails you, man?"

"That money," Shag snapped, flicking his gun the fraction of an inch in Tark's direction. . . .

Johnny lunged, and got inside the gun. He

grabbed Shag's gun arm with both hands, and swung around, back to the puncher, then doubled over, and threw him ten feet through the air. Shag lit with a jolt that tore the gun out of his hand, and he never did get to fire it. Johnny dived for it, the minute it went out of Shag's hand, but the puncher kicked out, and caught him in the ribs with a booted heel. Shag snarled at him like a panther, then twisted onto his hands and knees and scrambled for the gun himself.

But neither of them got it. It got to be a fist fight, with both of them standing on their knees, whaling at each other with deadly punches until Johnny felt as if a tree had fallen down on him. Shag got in one good killing punch that must have broken his hand. It made Johnny's jaw snap, and numbed his whole face, and for a brief span he swung at thin air because he couldn't see Shag, right there in front of him. He felt himself going over, and his head hit the ground with another jolt, and then Shag piled on top of him, and got hold of his throat, strangling him so he couldn't catch a breath.

Johnny's fist lashed up again, and flinched back with jarring pain, because he had caught the puncher square in the mouth, and knew he had snapped off his teeth, and sent 'em down his throat. The man gagged. His hold around Johnny's throat eased off. Johnny gave a desperate shove and got out from under.

It was getting lighter. The four horses were plumb boogered at what was going on. If they broke loose there would be hell to pay. A man who got set afoot in country like this was a walking corpse. Johnny hoped Shag would wilt before it happened. He went at him again with clawed hands, and this time his own fingers closed around the puncher's throat.

Shag kicked and punched to the end. Then, all at once, he went limp, and Johnny let his hold go. He got back to his feet, and stood there a moment, swaying back and forth, watching the willows go around him in a circle, blurring out until he couldn't tell green from light. And then Johnny went down, too, in a heap of aching bone and muscle.

CHAPTER THREE

Lost Draw

"I FEEL good! I feel real good!"

Johnny opened his eyes. A hot sun blazed down, straight at him. It was past noon, Johnny thought. Then the words he had just heard began to make sense, and he looked around. Tark Fire was sitting up. His hands hung limply in his lap, but what he had said gave Johnny a bigger jolt than all Shag could hand out.

He tried to sit up, then reeled back with a

howl of pain. "Well, I don't—I sure don't. . . . Where's that Shag?"

"Over there. I been watchin' him. He don't make a move. What's been goin' on here?"

"I got news a mile long." He tried to sit up again, and this time he made it. "Whew! My head! You feel good, eh?"

"I feel mighty good. You did quite a job, son."

"I don't believe you've got a fever any more, either, have you?"

"No, I ain't."

"You were bad off last night. I had to do somethin'."

"For anybody who ain't a sawbones, you did right well. Thanks, Johnny. I know I wouldn't 'a seen this day's light if you hadn't."

"Shag helped till he saw those money belts. Then he turned his smoke-wagon on me."

"I figured all along he was after that money."

"But he ain't in it alone. Wait'll you hear the rest of it." Johnny told him about the gang in the shallow coulee, and what he had heard said. It took a lot of telling, and when he got through, he wasn't sure whether Tark Fire believed him, or not. "It's the Keller gang, and Tegel's throwed in with them, I'm sure of it," he stated, positively.

"It don't seem reasonable."

"One of them called him 'pop,' an'—"

"What?" Tark's eyes came alive.

"A weasel-faced lookin'—"

"Balls of fire!" Tark broke in. "It's a fact, then. He had a no-good brat who was always gettin' into trouble. I remember him—looked just like a weasel sniffin' up a rat-hole."

"That's him all right."

"Tegel kept him out of jail as long as he could. Then he killed a man in a gunfight, an' lit out."

Johnny paused a moment, then went on, "That same weasel-face is the man who killed my father back in Dodge City."

"You—you know that, Johnny?"

"I know it for a fact."

One thing Johnny didn't mention, the outlaw talk about Molly. He aimed to take care of that part of it himself. He got to his feet, and tried a few steps back and forth. "One thing's sure," he went on, finally, "that bunch'll watch every move we make. We ain't goin' to git out of their sight for a minute. I can't say I want to—I want to run into them hombres head-on, when the time's right. But I'm wondering about Shag. We can't pull out o' here without him. They'd jump us, right off. An' if we take him along, we've got another big worry."

"Damn' funny—he don't make a move, does he?"

"No." Johnny moved toward the sprawled figure. There were two teeth knocked out of

Shag's jaw. His clothes were ripped and torn and blood-spattered, but there was more wrong with him than that. Johnny bent down a moment, then straightened up again. "No wonder he don't move," he said. "He's plumb dead!"

Two days later Johnny Webb and Tark Fire pulled up at the crest of a rising stretch of ground and looked down. In the sun-baked distance a dust spume hung in the sky, mist-thin, so that a watching man lost it in a blurred haze, and had to look away to rest his eyes before he could find it again.

"It's a drive, Johnny," Tark claimed suddenly. "A big drive."

Johnny nodded. "Tegel knew what he was talkin' about."

A third mounted figure sat beside them, but he didn't look down. Shag would never look down on a cattle trail again. He had a trail of his own to follow—to boothill—when Johnny could spare him.

The gang of renegades hadn't showed themselves. They were waiting for Tark Fire to lead them to his cattle-money cache, waiting for Shag to make his play. They wouldn't wait much longer, but so far Johnny's trick had worked. Shag, lashed to the saddle, the upper part of his body braced up with willow twigs, had given Johnny and Tark the respite they needed to get the aches and pains out of their joints. "I figure we'll have to make a run for it from here on in, though," Tark declared grimly.

"You figure you kin do it?"

Tark nodded. "Hell, I feel good."

"We'll keep out in the open, so we'll have a head start when they break out. Then we'll cut Shag loose, an' travel. You sure you kin handle a gun?"

"I could trigger a cannon if Tegel was at the other end of it."

"There'll be more than Tegel. Once they bust loose they'll come at us from all directions. But we've rode easy. Our horses are fair to middling fresh."

"Fair to middling," Tark echoed reminiscently. "One thing about Buffalo Horn—he knew good horseflesh. This critter's wilder'n a coot, but he kin go."

"I'll turn this wall-eyed jughead loose when they strike. We kin pick him up later, if—"

"Yeah—if. Let's go!"

THEY got only halfway down the slope when a bunch of riders came out of the willows on their right. Johnny cut the rope around Shag's legs, and saw him pitch to the ground. His mount swung off at an angle, and the wall-eye followed when Johnny let the lead rope go. "I hope that crazy jigeroo'll find out a lead rope ain't such a bad thing to follow, now that he's got to shift fer

himself," Tark remarked. "Where'd you ever git such a critter?"

"Let's go!" Johnny yelled, with a rake of his spurs.

A bullet whined at them, and the sound of the shot raced after it. "Crazy damn' rannys-hans!" Tark snarled. "Or was that a rifle?"

"No." Johnny watched Tark, still worried whether he could fork a horse that was going hell-bent. But Tark Fire had an evil grin on his face, and Shag's .45 was bunched in his fist, as if he'd never felt the unholy pangs of rawhide pulling him apart.

But grin, or no grin, it was a race with death, and they both knew it. Johnny kept an eye on the dust cloud up ahead, trying to gauge the distance. It might be three-four miles. It wasn't likely to be more. If Tark Fire could hold out that long, they could make it, and if the Firebrand punchers were the same breed they used to be, with leathery old Jim Fawcett roddin' them, they'd be just as apt at throwing lead as they would be throwing a steer. That was one thing Johnny could bank on.

But what worried him was that the whole pack of outlaws hadn't come out. There were only four of them, which left at least three unaccounted for, by the count Johnny had made the night he had followed Shag. There might be more, but there hadn't ought to be less. Unless they had split up, with one bunch of them dogging the drive.

Lead whined closer. That bunch of owl-hoots had fast horses. Johnny fired back, but luck wasn't with him, the way it had been back there with Buffalo Horn and his bucks. Finally, though, one man pitched out of the saddle, and his wild howl ripped through the air until he hit the ground.

Tark suddenly swung in closer. "Johnny," he yelled, "I just now thought of that no-good feller's name, that Tegel get. His name's Monk Tegel. Do with him what you want to, but leave the old man to me."

"Hell, they're chasin' us," Johnny yelled

back. "We ain't chasin' them. You forgot?"

"Hell, that's right!"

Green grass raced under them in a sweeping blur. Johnny saw a rash of dog holes and shuddered, but they got safely through them, leaving a quick hard rattle behind that spooked a little extra speed out of their mounts. One outlaw went down when he hit the holes. His horse must have pulled a hock, or broke a leg, because he went down like a bolt out of the sky, and it looked to Johnny like he rolled clear over the man before he came to a stop.

"Watch out for that draw up ahead," Tark yelled.

Johnny had seen it. It cut north and south across their path, ending in the boggy ground at the creek. It had steep walls, and Johnny swung north, because it looked like it played out up that way, too. But Tark didn't. He went over the edge, with a clatter of rocks that poured down after him, and got thrown before he got halfway. Johnny heard him cuss a blue streak at the half-wild horse, and swung back. "Keep goin'," Tark called up. "I'll hold 'em off. Git—"

A bullet chipped rock an inch from his head, and shut him up.

"Git down," Johnny yelled, pointing down in the draw. "They cut us off."

There were five men down there, more than enough to account for the missing renegades, and more than enough to handle. Johnny swung down. It was a bad break. Tark couldn't get back up the side of the draw, and he didn't have much protection down there from that cross-fire, except to hunker down behind that rock, with the edges of his big frame showing on all sides.

Flattened out along the edge, Johnny threw lead at the two men behind them. Those two hombres circled wide, and did what Johnny had figured on doing, swung into the draw where they could get down without breaking their necks. But they didn't go all the way down. Instead, they pulled up under cover of some rocks, and started shooting at Tark Fire



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from behind, working their way toward him across the loose rubble on foot.

Tark had to sit there and endure it. The minute he moved, he got it from both sides. If they flush him out, Johnny thought, he's done for. They got him boxed in—but not me. "Sit tight," he called down. "I got an idea."

As the two men worked closer in, the edge of the draw protected him from their fire. He crawled back, away from the rim, so he could rise up, then circled wide, and came in again on their flank. Tark hadn't budged, but he looked plumb uneasy. The five men below were working up toward him from the other side, and getting in close, while the two men Johnny had out-flanked were laying it down hot and heavy. The nearest one to him was a fat character, who was bellied out on the ground, wheezing uncomfortably as he swiveled back and forth to get a shot at Tark. All Johnny could see of the other was his boots, but the man was muttering savagely at a jammed gun, so, for the moment, he was harmless.

Johnny let the fat hombre see him, and his fat seemed to shrivel like snow as he whip-sawed to his hands and knees, and then struggled up to his feet. He was fast with a gun, though, and a lead slug chewed a hole in the thin lip of the draw at Johnny's feet, before Johnny fired.

Fatty teetered a moment like a barrel on a limber willow pole, and then crashed down to the ground.

The other renegade pulled in his legs, and stayed behind the rocks. Johnny surmised his gun was still out of whack, and he couldn't get Fatty's without exposing himself. "Come on out, man," Johnny invited, "or I'm comin' to git you."

He didn't get an answer, and slid down over the edge. The man circled the rock, like a squirrel around a tree, but Johnny finally flushed him out, and when he got him out in the open he saw it was Monk Tegel!

The man threw his worthless gun on the ground, and his hands went up. His face was yellow with fear, his slack mouth twitched.

Johnny threw his gun at Monk's feet. It kicked up a puff of dust, and flashed briefly in the sunshine.

Monk's greedy eyes fastened on it, and stayed there. Johnny didn't move. "You don't know if I've got a sneak gun or not. An' if I got one, you don't know if I kin git to it in time. There's only one way of finding out, mister. Grab that gun, an' come up shooting."

Monk lunged, scooping up the gun, stumbling forward straight at Johnny, whose hands were still empty. "You damn' fool," Monk jeered, "you think you kin—"

The rest of it died on his lips. Johnny's gun hand moved. His gun flamed, pointblank,

and a bullet stopped Monk's laugh of triumph. It stopped him in his tracks, too, and flung him back against the rock. His face spouted blood, and he floundered blindly a second. Then his knees gave way, and his neck kinked, and he pitched down. He was dead before he hit the ground.

"HELL," Tark told Johnny when they got to the floor of the narrow, steep-walled draw, "you ain't the only one who kin throw lead."

"But I—I didn't hear any shooting."

"You were too busy with that weasel-face to hear anything."

There sure enough had been shooting down there, and all of it hadn't come from Tark Fire's gun. Jim Fawcett, trail boss of the Fire-brand drive, rode up.

"We heard the gunfire," Jim Fawcett explained, "so we come hell-a-tootin'. We didn't expect to find you in a tight, though, boss."

"I been in a tight a long time," Tark said, with a long sigh of relief. "Got a big drive?"

"Yeah," Jim said. "An' we're aimin' to send the money back through the bank."

"Good idea," Tark agreed. Then he flared up again. "Whose bank?"

"We got a new one down there. Tegel got into trouble, an' lit out."

"Yeah, I know," Tark said.

"How you know?"

"Look down there at that hombre, Jim." He pointed at one of the dead renegades. "That's him."

"Balls of fire!" Fawcett cried. "So it is."

"I wish I could a' told you," Tark said regretfully. "I wanted him saved so I could personally gut-shoot him."

"I'm sorry, boss."

"It's all right, I guess," Tark grumbled, "but I'll hold it agin you a long time, Jim."

Then Tark's eyes suddenly lit on one of the riders, and flashed fire. "Boys," he began—"and girls. Dammit, Molly, what in tarnation you doin' here?"

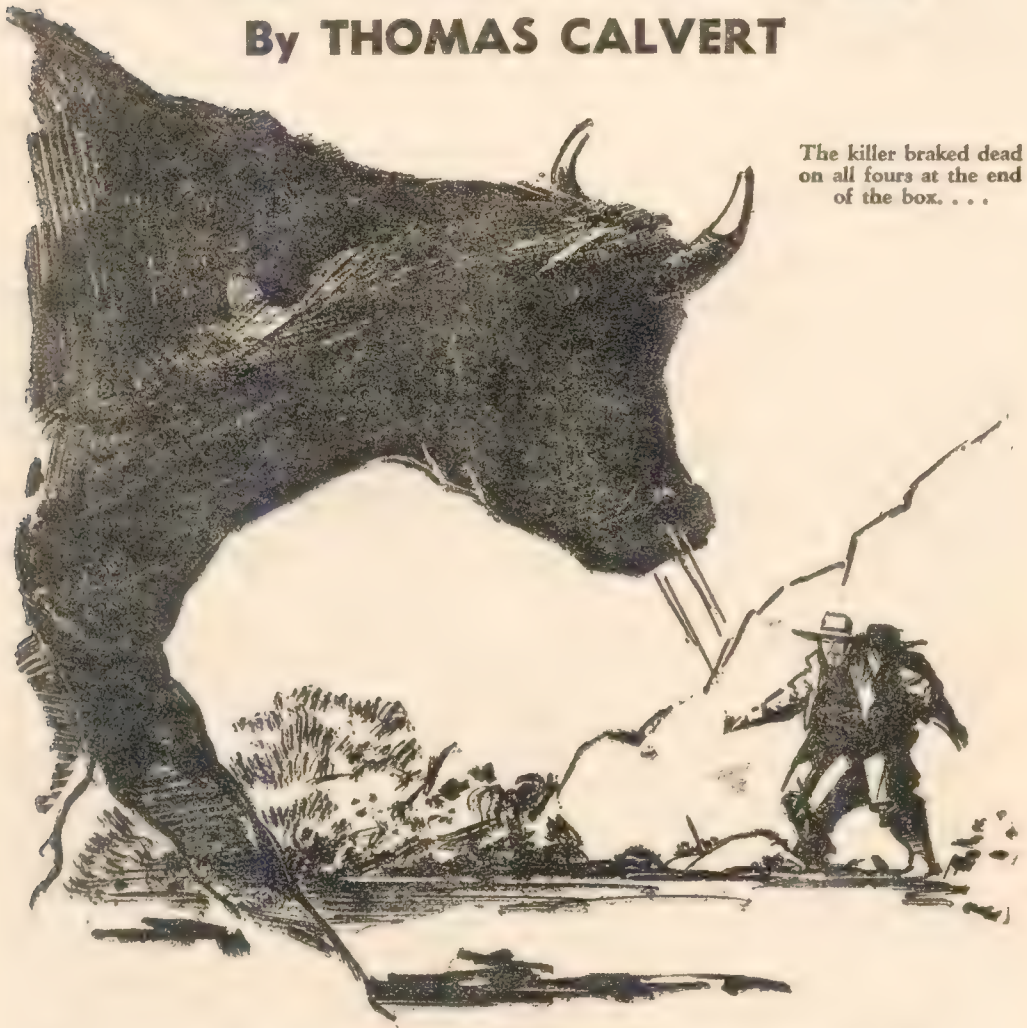
"Well, I—" her face flamed. Then she swung from her horse, and stumbled into Tark's battered old arms.

Johnny's eyes settled on her with a smoky, gentle look. She was taller than he remembered, and beautiful to look at. And still as headstrong as ever! He remembered how she would always try to boss him, and then, when he got his dander up, she would change suddenly and, with quivering lips, do everything he wanted her to do.

When Tark let her go, she stood back a moment, looking at Johnny, and her lips began to quiver in the old way, and Johnny had the sense to open his arms the way Tark had done. And Molly had the sense to walk into them.

THE KILLER

By THOMAS CALVERT



The killer braked dead
on all fours at the end
of the box. . . .

His years made the kid an outcast—a ghost spooking the rim of hell's round-up—until the day came when he had to do a man's work—or a better man would die!

THE kid came busting in on the hiring for the Powder County round-up, sounding like a combination Comanche raid and tornado half a mile away. He came galloping down the plain, riding in his stirrups, and spinning a loop big enough to rope a wagon train. Almost on top of the bosses he let out an ear-splitting whoop and let the loop fly, but a piece of blowing paper shied his horse and the throw went wild. Instead of snagging the wagon tongue at which it was

aimed, the loop settled neatly over the fancy traveling kitchen stovepipe and carried it loose, dumping most of the soot down the neck of Boss Kendrick, who stood below.

Hiring day was never one of good mood for the boss in any case. Every outfit in the shakedown needed extra hands, and all seemed to want the same men. On top of it, special arrangements had to be made for every brand, and every rancher had a damned special idea of in just what country, and how, he wanted

to work the drive. The boss sat on the lid.

Boss Kendrick was in no humorous mood when the stovepipe came down, and he was in a mood of downright mayhem when he blew and beat himself free of the soot. The boys, of course, were laughing like all get-out, and it might be funny now; but it wouldn't be funny when some chesty lobo began to throw his weight around under the temper and strain of the final week. That was the time when things that had been funny came back to haunt a round-up with fists smashing bone and, sometimes, the bark of six-guns or the flash of a flying axe.

The kid was drifting back, coiling his rope and looking kind of dumbfounded and shamed, but still cocky as the devil. Kendrick glared at him and demanded, "Just what was the idea of that?"

"Well, I didn't mean nothin' like that, Mr. Kendrick," the boy apologized. "But you done turned me down for a job three years runnin', and I figured to show you I can be some use."

"This is the fourth year I'm turning you down," Kendrick stated flatly. "And don't let me catch you hanging around more'n about a minute!"

The kid looked crestfallen but determined. He said stubbornly, "I got you all riled up, Mr. Kendrick, or you wouldn't say that. You need good men."

A chuckle ran through the crowd. The kid's name was Taos Small, but they had renamed him Too Small, which expressed him. He had begun haunting the round-up for a job when he was ten, and he was not much larger at fourteen.

T. L. Daly, who was feeling chipper, having corralled the drift through his neighbor's range—which meant he would get to brand all his own calves, for a change, and whatever others his conscience would allow him to classify as strays—called over, "Now there, Boss Kendrick, the kid has got you if you aim to be a fair man! You wouldn't let a wild throw stop you from hiring a big strapping fella, would you?"

"No, by gum!" the boss grated with a sudden gleam in his eyes. "Kid, I will take that back and hire you! We need us a water boy."

Now this was about as thankless and ugly a job as any. Springs capable of filling two canteens at a clip got mighty stirred up when you tried to squeeze in ten; and men kicked and ridden and roped to hell-and-gone got mighty free with their boots when their water turned up muddy. But more important, a water boy was just nothing at all. He was the very bottom of the shakedown, and by custom, the job was never offered to anyone but some local halfwit.

The kid whitened beneath his chestnut burn and swallowed. But he had sand. He didn't

just turn the job down and drift off. He said hotly, "You know I got a right to work on cattle, Mr. Kendrick! Doggone, I been roping and branding my own since I was a tyke! You got no call to offer a man with his own spread that job!"

The kid's "spread" consisted of eight derelict and ancient mavericks he had been able to bush up, and one calf. The round-up boss regarded him with a bleak gaze. "Do you want 'Hell, no!" the kid yelled at him. "I got the job or not?"

some pride!"

"Then take it somewheres else," the boss snapped. "Vamoose pronto, or I'll put a rope brand right smack on the bottom of that pride!"

The kid colored at the laughter, but his jaw set as he turned his calico away. He mumbled angrily, "I'll stick along. You'll need me yet!"

"That's the spirit, Too Small!" Daly told him. "Don't let anyone ride you off a job!"

"He jist don't want to give me a chance on account of my size," the kid grumbled. "But I'm spry enough to make up for that any time!"

"Sure you are," Daly agreed, delighted with the prospect of seeing Boss Kendrick annoyed. "And you jist hunker down at our chuck fire anytime yore a-mind. You'll get yore chance before round-up end!"

In his present hilarious mood, Daly might have hired the boy if he could. But for all the small horseplay, round-up was a darned serious job, under the complete authority of the boss. In matters of hiring extra help and countless details, his word was final. Had Boss Kendrick wanted to lower himself to make a point of it, he could have ordered the kid—or Daly, for that matter—out of the working.

It would have marked him, of course, as a man of small and personal animosity, because of his letting the kid just drift along. The outfits were good-natured at first, making a joke of it. But there were damned few jokes left in them by the end of the second week. And the kid was just drifting, a spare part without any work or job. He would have been willing enough, but no outfit dared to use him. And it could grow kind of irritating to a man slamming around in a saddle fourteen hours without enough help, to see a spare part out there practicing rope spinning on the horizon. They began to get pretty mean and tough about it.

"WHY don't you give him a crew job?" old man Wheeler, who had a soft spot for kids, asked Kendrick.

"That fresh little mustang?" the boss barked. "What I ought to give him is a rope-hauling for having the crust to stick around! You think any boy with pride would keep rub-

bing his face in yore way after what I told him?"

"You can't blame a man for wanting to work," Wheeler pointed out.

The boss snorted contemptuously. "He don't want to work! He'd quit first day. He's just got a chance for some free grub and has took it."

"It ain't too happy for him," Wheeler commented. "The boys are getting a mite ugly, and he is handy to take it out on."

But not even the growing bad temper of overwork and strain drove the kid away. Even when Daly came steaming up in an ornery mood and cuffed him out of the chuck circle, the kid stuck. He just dropped off alone and lived on jackrabbits and berries. And each day he made a point of drifting across Boss Kendrick's sight, just in case the boss had changed his mind under the necessity of accidents and crippled help.

The kid had the vaguely formed notion that he was proving his guts. But all he was proving to the boss—and to the whole round-up, in its growing sullen mood—was that he was even fresher than the boss had thought.

In the third week, the round-up hit Sweet-grass Mesa, and things really got tough. This was a mesa so cut and chopped and scrouged with canyons, washes, ravines and mountains that no man actually ever had known it thoroughly, and no round-up had ever really combed it. The longhorns up here were devils; not the semi-blooded and tamed cattle of the lowlands, but a breed ugly and mean and wild as hell itself, ready to die before they'd take a rope or brand. There was an old ghost bull up here, too, so tough and devilish that no man

had ever dropped his reata over it and lived to tell. They called it the killer and it had five men to its credit.

It was a dirty week, filled with cursing and pain and broken bones.

Under the circumstances, Boss Kendrick pitched into the actual work to help. There was no plan or rhyme or reason about the work up here. Outfits were broken wide. Every man rode with a branding iron swinging from his saddle, and when he found a cow or calf, he threw it and built a fire and branded it, right there. There was no gathering critters into a herd for orderly work. It was every man for himself, and catch-as-catch-can.

The kid had gotten downright bold that morning and asked the boss a second time for a job. "What the hell do you figure you could do with these man-killers?" Kendrick had demanded contemptuously. "Even if you had guts, which I doubt, you ain't got the weight to snub a rope fast!"

"I'm mighty spry," the kid pointed out. "Gee, Mister Kendrick, gimme a chance—"

"I ain't worried about you," the boss snapped. "But I don't want you in the way of good men! You get the hell out of this round-up by tomorrow, Too Small, and I don't mean mebbe. Now, sashay!"

The kid drifted, but he saw him a couple of times again that day, and each time threw him into a worse mood. The boss had strained himself badly, handling a mean old devil back in Chokeberry Run, and burned his leg with the branding iron as well. He came out coiling his rope and turning the air purple. He was in one sweet nasty temper when a yodeled signal sang across the range and, looking up, he



DOWN RIVER TO BUCKSKIN HELL!

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saw an almost pure white maverick with a calf humping full tilt into the brush of a dead-end box.

The boss let out a blast of breath and put his horse into gallop. He was feeling mean enough to tackle the damned runaway with his bare hands. He cornered the cow and she spun and let out an ear-splitting bawl. She was ready for fight, but too smart to fight where she could dodge. She gave him a hard, fierce play, protecting her calf all that time. It was a challenge that matched Boss Kendrick's temper, and he chased her, with his lips flatted back in a mirthless grin. He let out a yell of triumph as his loop sailed out and dropped.

But she bucked and the loop caught across her chest and just at that moment, his horse slipped over a rock. The cow was bawling and humping and the snap of the rope crashed Kendrick and his horse to the ground. The frenzied horse scrambled up and, stirrup-hauling Kendrick, followed the cow out of the box. Kendrick kicked loose, but he was hurt and dazed, and somewhere along two hundred yards of brush, he had dropped his gun.

He limped back to look for it, and it was at that moment the roiled-up killer came charging into the box. He had been off-siding that white cow, his favorite one, and seeing her dash out, still towing the horse, his wily and murderous hatred told him he had a man cornered afoot.

The killer braked dead on all fours at the end of the box and looked at Kendrick with ugly, red-rimmed eyes. He flung back his big-muscled neck and blew, and then came forward slowly, swinging his enormous horns from side to side. His pace picked up with a terrible, timed certainty.

Boss Kendrick turned and saw it and turned gray beneath his black burn. He was too much cowman to underestimate those movements. That bull had blood in his eyes and blood upon his mind, and at any instant now, his swinging walk would shift into a thunderous charge and when he struck, he would be a ton of greased lightning, with those cruel, hooked horns and heavy armored feet for good measure. Kendrick backed slowly toward the sheer wall that dead-ended the box.

The bull's pace was quickening, becoming straighter and more balanced, as the kid swept into sight. The kid had never had enough money to buy a decent pistol, and somehow, today, was riding without his gun. He sized things up and let out a splitting yell.

BUT the bull was too wise for that old trick; he took his enemies one by one. He flung the kid one single glance, and then broke into a trot, making straight for the boss.

The boy's face went peaked, but pretty de-

termined, too. He had his rope swinging, but he suddenly realized the futility of that against such enormous, berserk weight, and snagged it back in place as he put his horse into full run. He came up alongside the big thundering beast just as it broke into a gallop.

Kendrick yelled, "Stand clear! You can't bulldog that brute!" and tried vainly to scramble up a crack in the wall.

The kid yelled wildly, "You don't know everything, Mr. Kendrick!" and leaped from his horse. He landed on the bull's neck, grasping a horn.

The bull gave an enraged roar and flung his head, but the kid's legs were around his neck and he ducked the horn that would have given a crushing blow. There was a natural pendulum swing that followed. When the bull's head swung down, the kid scrambled in a blur of motion—and Boss Kendrick looked and saw him literally sitting in the curve of that vicious four-foot horn!

The kid's weight was not much, but it was enough to carry. He went under the bull, and shot off like a stone from a slingshot on the other side. The bull's enormous head went half around and out of balance, and the killer stumbled and crashed down, breaking his neck as he slithered ponderously through the roiling dust.

Boss Kendrick watched, with a kind of nightmare amazement, as the animal skidded, reaching almost to his feet. He hobbled gingerly around its thrashing hoofs and went over to pick up the kid. The boy reeled as if he'd been hit with a mallet.

The boss took the back of his scrawny neck and squeezed it tight and asked dubiously, "You all right, kid?"

Just then some of the boys broke in and up the box, one of them sending a burst of shots to put the old killer out of agony. They hauled up and looked at the scene and then at the boss with something akin to worship.

"Boss," Slim Waldron muttered, "that is really bulldoggin'."

Kendrick waved a hand toward the kid. "It was horn-sittin', but you can tell it what you like. He did it!" He looked back at the kid as if he still couldn't believe it. "You feel all right now?"

"Hell, why shouldn't I?" the kid yipped.

"That ain't nothin' I couldn't do every day!" And nodding his head emphatically, he fell flat down.

"Can't knock the freshness out of that colt," Kendrick considered with a grin. He looked at the rough-humored grins on the men's faces. "Well boys, when you can't lick a man proper, I reckon you got to give him a job, that right?"

"Sure 'nough," Slim Waldron chuckled. "How about expert bull-sitter, boss?"

Grempe lost his head completely—he grabbed the kid by the neck. . . .



THE GUNSMOKE WAY

By JOE ARCHIBALD

*There was a pot of blood at the
end of Sid Crain's rainbow—and
a hangnoose just beyond!*

SID CRAIN rode into the ranch yard of the big Walking R one afternoon, a few moments before the cook banged a wheel spoke against the metal triangle near the grubshack. It so happened that Ira Tuckerman needed a hand and Crain was hired before he got out of the saddle. The strain of long hours of riding was pulling the muscles down over

the bones of his face and Paint Harker, Tuckerman's foreman said, "By the looks of that sorrel, you've rode it clear from Texas, mister."

"We been movin' along for a day or two," Sid said and sleeved sweat and trail dust from his face.

Then Harker snapped, "How many outfits you been with?"

"Lost count," Sid said. "I'd say a dozen, the last two, three years. I got my reasons, Harker an' don't guess it's nobody's business, long as I do a day's work for a day's pay."

"Go and get your chuck," Harker said.

Nothing had been said about hiring him, but less than twenty-four hours later, Paint and the Walking R punchers admitted that Sid was worthy of it. He could do everything with a bronc and a rope but get them to talk and Paint Harker opined that he would not be too much surprised if the new hand eventually accomplished that.

On that first day, Sid Crain gave Paint's punchers a lesson in riding sign. When he trailed three strays to a bog hole and helped pull the animals out, a little rider named Bandy said admiringly, "Why, they never left tracks enough t' trip up an ant, Paint."

It was Tuckerman himself who called his foreman's attention to the way Sid carried his six-gun. "A salty cuss, Paint. He don't just wear that iron for show. Don't look like the ordinary run of fiddle-foots, not at all."

"Be a good man to have around if the hill bunch moves in too close ag'in," was all Paint said.

Tuckerman nodded. "But I won't have gunners on this spread, Paint."

"I'll keep my ears clean, Ira. He's sure a close-mouthed cuss."

PAIN'T HARKER bided his time. At the end of the week, which was also the end of the month, Sid Crain got his pay and he went over to Shelby with Paint and half a dozen other Walking R punchers. He stood at the bar for a while with the foreman and had two stiff drinks and watched, in the bar mirror, a little old man who sat in a corner and who worked diligently with a small block of wood and a jackknife.

He turned down a third drink and turned and propped himself up against the bar by his elbows and watched the little hombre whittle. "Who sweeps up after the jasper?" he asked finally.

Paint laughed. "Come on," he said. He went over to the little table in the corner and sat down in a chair. "Sid, I want you t' meet Jubel Moody, the wood carver from Olympus."

Sid grinned and held out his hand to the carver. Jube's age was questionable. Folks in Shelby said he helped clear away the trees and

the rocks to build the first shack in that corner of the state. He had tobacco-stained unruly whiskers and little twinkling eyes and spoke in the voice of the very old.

"Glad t' know y', mister," Jube said. "Never saw you 'round before." He dug the tip of his knife into the wood and snapped a piece loose.

"Got any of your finished stuff with you, Jube?" Paint asked.

"Yep," the old man said and shoved a gnarled hand into the pocket of his faded serge coat. He brought out a sample of his craft and handed it to Sid Crain. The puncher whistled softly through his lips and turned it over and over with his fingers. It was a small bird, something like a barn swallow. He looked hopefully at Jube.

"Yourn fer two dollars," Jube said.

"A bargain, Sid," Paint said. "You ought to see the burro he carved. An' the bronc—"

"Can't believe it," Sid said and gave Jube the money.

"Ought t' be good," Jube said in his cracked voice. "Been carvin' fer near thirty years. You keep practicin' at anythin'—like with that six-gun you got there, mister. You just have t' git expert, huh?"

Sid Crain's face lost its grin. He said, "I reckon you're right, Jube," and kept his eyes away from Paint Harker. "Maybe we could git a steak, Paint. That beef I been chawin' out at Tuckerman's must have been driven on the run clear from Idaho."

They moved along the walk to the restaurant and were turning into a doorway when the sound of shot spun them around. A man over in front of the blacksmith shop let out a yell of pain, staggered backwards and sat down heavily. Men came out of the false fronts lining the street.

Sid Crain suddenly cried out, "Paint, look!" He pointed to a small figure running into an areaway and then started that way. "Seemed no more than a kid."

The Walking R punchers cornered the pint-sized gunman at a dead end. Paint said, "I'll be—it's the sheriff's kid. Hey, what are you shootin' up the town for, Johnny?"

The boy was frightened out of speech and he just huddled against a high board fence and stared at the two men towering over him. He had a gunbelt pulled to the last notch around his waist and the big leather holster nearly touched the ground. Paint Harker bent over and picked up a business-like Colt and broke it open. "Five more cartridges in it, Sid, Johnny, what in—"

"I—didn't know it was loaded," the boy said. "I found—it in—"

Will Burdick came into the areaway and picked his son up by the scruff of the neck and the seat of his pants and put him over his knee

and started dusting him. Then he put Johnny on his feet and said, "That'll teach you not to fool with guns. Now you run home as fast as you can go, you ornery little cuss!"

Paint said, "Where'd he get the gun, Will?"

"It was hangin' up in my office. I took it off that wide-looper we run out of town a week ago. My fault I didn't empty it, Paint. It's lucky Chub Tully wa'n't hurt worse."

"Guess Johnny wants to take your place in office, Sheriff," Sid Crain grinned. "He figures on gettin' ready early."

"Always playin' with guns," Will Burdick said. "I got t' beat it out of him, Paint."

THE three men went back to the saloon. Chub Tully limped in when they'd had a round and the doctor had dressed the bullet burn on his leg. Two good stiff drinks put Chub in a jovial, forgiving mood. "Imagine the li'l squirt," he said.

Jube Moody said, "Only natural fer Johnny t' play he's a salty bucko. Figure I got t' see what I kin do fer him."

Four riders came into Shelby and three of them entered the saloon just as Paint and Sid Crain started out for the restaurant once more. The new Walking R puncher studied the faces of these men swiftly as they passed him.

Paint said, a few moments later, "Hat riders, Sid. Bart Waggoner ain't too particular, seein' his range is mighty close to the hill crowd's territory."

"One of them looked kinda spooky," Sid said and then seemed to forget everything for the moment but his hunger. He turned into the eating place and was throwing a long leg over a rickety stool when Paint Harker heard him draw his breath in suddenly. Sid froze in that awkward position and looked toward the rear of the long narrow room. The foreman asked quietly, "What's eatin' you, Sid?"

"That gent with the slick hair, Paint. The solemn-looking jasper. Who is he?"

The foreman laughed shortly. "I thought you'd really tagged a badman, Sid. That's Harry Gremp an' works for a small outfit over by the Junction. Sometimes they call him Deacon. Harry passes the collection plate every Sunday mornin' in the church."

"Don't carry a gun," Sid said. He left two-thirds of his steak and Paint glanced at him warily. He noticed a definite change come over the new Walking R puncher's face. The softness went out of it, until the features became all but unfamiliar.

Finally Paint asked, "What is it you are really lookin' for, friend?"

Sid Crain slipped off the stool. "I'll see you in a minute." He walked down to the end of the long narrow room and stood over Gremp. Paint Harker left the counter and

followed Sid, moving very slowly, warily.

He heard Sid ask Gremp, "Ever been up in the Muleshoe country near the Utah line? You look like somebody I used to know." Gremp shook his head. "Can't say I was, mister."

A hard-bitten rider with Gremp half rose from his chair, "Who is this nosey brush-jumper, Harry?"

Sid Crain drove the flat of his hand against the man's chest and he went over backwards, chair and all. Paint Harker rushed in and called to Sid. He saw that his puncher had drawn a six-gun and he heard another iron clatter on the floor.

"I just asked a civil question," Sid said. "I got my answer, such as it was." He moved backward, smiling. "Maybe I'll see you in church, Harry."

"I see you are a man of violence," Gremp said softly. "No argument was ever settled rightly with a gun. A man can be in the wrong and still win out by being faster on the draw."

"Yeah," Sid said. He was grinning a little, but not with amusement. "He sure can. Come on, Paint. Ready to ride home?"

On the way out to the Walking R, Sid Crain said, "You look pretty square to me, Paint. The others say you're a man to cotton to. Don't get an idea into your head that the stuff I've drunk is talking."

"I won't, Sid."

"I'm looking for a man, Paint."

"I could have bet my life on that, mister."

"I had a brother," Sid Crain said. "He worked for an outfit up in the Muleshoe country. I was wearing a star at the county seat about twenty miles away. One day the boss of the Barred Diamond sent for me. He took me into town and showed me a man laid out on a long table in an undertaking parlor. It was my brother Joe, Paint. Joe had been shot plumb through the heart."

"Tough, Sid. That was tough," the foreman said, and reined his bronc in closer.

"Yeah, they said they found Joe near the remains of a fire and there was a runnin' iron alongside of him. Seems that somebody had been blottin' brands on the Barred Diamond range for some time. They told me it looked like Joe got caught redhanded. When they found him he had his Colt clear and that seemed mighty funny to me, Paint."

"How so?"

"Joe was fast with a six-gun. An' he wa'n't shot from behind. If he'd been guilty he would have been watchin' mighty close," Sid Crain said. "I figure it was Joe surprised the brand blotter an' not the other way around."

"You never could prove it on that, though, Sid."

"Not as yet, Paint. Somethin' happened up north couple years ago gave me a little more,"

Sid said. "A bunch of Pothook punchers cornered an old badman named Tunk Garvey with about twenty head of their cows. Garvey was nearly sixty but he shot it out with the riders. He was a tough old owlhooter and lived nearly half a day with a mess of bullets in him. Seems he got scared of what he'd find on the other side of the river and he bared his black soul, Paint."

"Yeah?"

"He did. He confessed to a lot of things he'd done. I sat with him the last two hours. He said he remembered Joe Crain bein' shot. He said Joe wasn't blottin' any brands. Had to be somebody else. One of four men workin' along the Muleshoe who used to sell stolen stock to him. He described the four men the best he could. Old Tunk had one hell of a memory. I've met two of the rustlers since, Paint. I proved to myself they didn't kill Joe. I got a way, Paint."

Paint Harker waited for more but Sid Crain kept his lips trapped all the rest of the way to the Walking R. Nearing the gate, Paint said, "Take it easy, Sid. You can't gun a man down in this part of the country even though you got a good reason. Anythin' but a stand-up fight is murder, Sid. The other man has to have a gun, too."

Sid Crain stared at him quietly. Then, "That's right, Paint. An' the man who killed Joe don't deserve nothin' less than a killin'. Maybe I'll be sure of somethin' in a day or two."

TUCKERMAN sent for Sid Crain late the next Saturday night. The owner of the Walking R sat on the porch of the ranchhouse, smoking a big cigar.

"Paint tells me you aim to go to prayer meetin' tomorrow, Crain," Tuckerman said. "Now, I like that in a man. Figure if you care to, you can ride in the buckboard with me. I always thought it looked more fittin' to attend church in some kind of carriage, Crain. I leave about nine-thirty in the morning."

"Thanks a heap," Sid said. He walked back to the bunkhouse grinning to himself. The next morning he sat in an aisle seat in the Shelby house of worship and tried to join in the hymns he had not sung for years. He tried to keep from yawning while the Reverend Perley Chettlewitz preached the wages of sin for at least an hour. When the sermon was over, the old melodeon began to play an appropriate hymn while Harry Grempe and a little bald man came down from the front with the collection plates.

Harry Grempe finally came to where Sid Crain sat and the puncher, before the plate was passed in toward the wall, dropped a silver dollar into the plate and made it spin. It sent up a disturbing ringing sound and Tucker-

man nudged his rider and glared at him. Sid kept watching Grempe's solemn countenance. The man caught at the silver dollar to stop its spinning and then he held it up and looked at it closely. A muscle in his face jumped and he looked at Sid Crain quickly, nearly dropping the collection he had taken in.

"It's a mite dented," Sid said. "But it won't matter with the parson. It's still legal tender, Deacon."

Grempe forced a smile and passed on to the next row of seats. Tuckerman cleared his throat nervously and wiped his rugged face with a handkerchief. When Grempe turned the collection over to the preacher, he turned and walked down the aisle, and although he had control once more there was the oil-shine of sweat on his face.

Sid Crain entered the bunkhouse at the Walking R two hours later and found Paint Harker and two punchers working over an old jigsaw puzzle. Paint looked up and said, "I don't see no halo over your thick head, Sid. I don't guess the preacher's medicine took on you."

"Picture puzzle, huh?" Crain said, a bleakness in his eyes. "I been workin' on one. Got a piece today that fits, I'm pretty sure."

Harker got up and followed Crain to the far end of the bunkhouse. "You got to be sure, Sid. Things are changin' out here. All a man had to have one time was a good reason. Other men took his word for it, if they knew him to be straight. They got a lot more legal hangin's now."

"Thanks, I'll remember that." Sid took his six-gun out of its holster and placed it on a table. "Got an old wool rag, Paint? Somethin' soft. A fast horse or a gun—you got t' keep 'em curried an' rubbed down."

"I'll look," the foreman said and felt that chill run along his bones again. He knew gun fever when he saw it. It was burning through Sid Crain.

An hour later he had quieted the man a little, reminded him what a man's life could be when there was a price on his head. Finally Sid Crain took a long deep breath and banged the flat of his hand against his knee. "Yeah, Paint. I guess I got to be satisfied with beatin' a man within an inch of his life. But I won't never be satisfied. I made Joe a certain promise. . . ."

PAINT HARKER drove the Walking R hands at a killing pace during the next three days, primarily to keep Sid Crain's mind off the business of killing. Toward dusk of the third day, he went into Shelby in a dead-axe wagon with Sid to get some rolls of barbed wire.

When the wagon was loaded the punchers drove over to the saloon and went in for a

drink. Jube Moody was in his accustomed place, but he was not whittling. He was fiddling with an old hogleg, prying loose the polished bone from one side of the handle.

Sid went over and picked up the old weapon. "Single action, huh? Daniel Boone must have used this Colt, Jube."

"Nope, but I did. Got me three Apaches with it, Crain. When I was with ridin' fer Stoudenmire down in—say you know hickory is kinda scarce? One of the bes' whittlin' woods. The gover'ment oughter do somethin' about the hickory blight in these parts. You ask me t' have a drink?"

Paint motioned to the barkeep. "Give him a good one, Pete. Let's get goin', Sid."

Riding along the street in the old wagon, Sid Crain read the big posters that were displayed in store windows and nailed to the sides of the building. The biggest social event of the year was to take place in town on Saturday night—the pre-roundup dance at the Odd Fellow's Hall.

"Big doin's, is it?" Sid asked.

"Nobody misses it who's got at least one leg, Sid. Purties' gals for miles around get to that shindig. Ought to go an' find you one, Sid. Woman's the best thing to settle a man down."

Halfway to the Walking R, three riders dropped down off the roadbank and cut across in front of the wagon. Sid Crain said suddenly, "There's Grempl!"

"Figure if he had blood like runs in your veins on his conscience, he would have lit out, Sid," Paint said. "You could be mistaken."

"I got to be sure," Sid snapped, and watched the three riders become swallowed up in a cloud of dust far below.

At nine o'clock on dance night, Sid Crain walked out of the dance hall unobserved by Paint Harker, who was stepping high and wide. The street was almost deserted and a thin mist hung over the town—the lights of the street lamps glowed in it like St. Elmo's lights. He walked slowly along a planked walk to the church where light shone in a window. He had been asking questions for several days now. He had found out that Harry Grempl and four other men formed a vestry and met for a while on Saturday night with the preacher.

He looked in the window and saw Grempl. He certainly looked like a pious man. Sitting there, no one would ever think Grempl had once done business on the other side of the fence—with an old badman like Tunk Garvey, for instance. Paint had been right. You could hang for shooting down a pious man like Harry Grempl. He waited until the meeting broke up and then went across the street and took his stand in front of the wheelwright's. Grempl took his leave of the other vestrymen and came across the street alone and then Sid

Crain moved to the edge of the walk and called out, "Grempl, I want to talk to you."

Grempl stopped, peered through the misty lamplight, and then walked forward again. "Crain," he said. "All right, hurry it up."

The orchestra up the street stepped up its noise and Sid said, "I hung a man once, legally. He asked for a three-piece orchestra to play while he danced. The damn'dest thing—"

"What do you want, Crain?"

"**H**ARRY, you lied," Sid said. "A vestryman, at that. You were up on the Muleshoe once. You rustled beef and you killed Joe Crain!"

Grempl said, "You're crazy, friend!"

"That silver dollar I dropped in the plate, Harry," Sid ground out. "You nearly caved in when you saw it. You carried it once. You were the last man to drop it in Tunk Garvey's hand. You got it from a wide-looper who told you where to deliver stolen stock. When a man produced that dented dollar, Tunk knew he was one of his kind. Tunk made that dent in the coin himself with a forty-five slug. It was a kind of password, Harry. Tunk give that to me before he died. He said you were the last to give it up. Tunk didn't know your name but he never forgot a face. In his business, he couldn't afford to, Harry."

"It's a lie, Crain!" Harry Grempl tried to laugh as he backed away.

"Don't carry a gun, huh, Harry? Kind of saves your skin. When you left the Muleshoe you figgered to hide behind somethin' more powerful, seein' as how you maybe weren't too good with a Colt unless you had an illegal drop on a man like Joe. Harry, I'm goin' to give you the beatin' of your life. Move along until you get to the hotel. Then cut into the area-way. If you make one little yell, I'll take a chance on killin' you!"

"They'd hang you, Crain," Grempl choked out. "You couldn't prove—" The man turned and stumbled along the walk.

Sid said, "Hell, if you only had a gun. Where did you keep it when Joe thought he had you dead t' rights?"

"You can't do this, Crain! You'll see I got friends—"

"Keep movin', Grempl. Wonder did you give that rustler's identification tag to the preacher, or did you throw it away or bury it, Harry?" Crain taunted. "Tunk said you carried a gun that time you turned the twelve head of Barred Diamond stock over to him. Down here you are a pious man who is afraid of guns." Sid Crain laughed. "Keep movin', Harry." He unbuckled his gunbelt and tossed it into an old grocery crate in front of a store a block from the hotel. "So's I won't be tempted to shoot you, you skunk! Just my fists against yours, Grempl!" He shoved the

man and Grempp fell to his knees, got up and moved slowly forward again.

It was then than Sid Crain saw Johnny Burdick come running around the corner of the sheriff's office. He had a gunbelt around his waist and was waving a Colt in his small fist. "Stop, or I'll shoot, y' coyote!" Johnny yelled playfully, and then Harry Grempp lost his head, the fear of physical pain robbing him of sane reasoning—the knowledge that this man would stalk him forever, running hot through his brain. He caught Will Burdick's son by the neck, flung him against the side of a building and wrenched the gun loose from his hand. Johnny cried out with pain and Grempp backed out into the street fast. "Take it, Crain!" he fairly screeched.

Sid drew from inside his coat and fired, and Harry Grempp went over on his back and into the dust of the street. Sid ran forward and picked up a Colt, was about to toss it toward the walk when there seemed something strange about it. Johnny Burdick stumbled toward him, crying. "It wasn't a real gun," he said. "Jube Moody made it so's I wouldn't fool with real—"

He hardly heard Grempp swearing at his pain. He turned the gun over and over in his hands and saw what a beautiful job it was. On the handle were the time-worn pieces of bone Jube had been prying off his old single-action the day he and Paint had come into Shelby for the wire. Jube had added weight to the gun with a long thin strip of metal and he had put silver paint on it that made it shine in the lamplight.

Will Burdick came running up. "I saw that, Sid," he yelled. "But I was too far down the street—Johnny, you little cuss, I said for you t' be in bed by nine." He knelt beside Grempp. "He isn't dead, Sid. Hit pretty bad though—"

"Sheriff, how would I know it wasn't—"

"Nothing against you, Crain. Somebody help me with Grempp. We'll get him to the doc's."

Paint Harker reached them, with other townsmen and hands. He caught at Sid's arm. "Hell, I should've watched you—"

"Come on, Paint," Sid said. "I need a couple of witnesses." He pulled the Walking R foreman along with him.

Back there Jube Moody was saying, "Guess I did too good a job on that hogleg, sheriff. An' them punchers sayin' I couldn't make a six-gun outa hickory t' fool nobody, not even in the dark! Reckon they owe me some drinks, Will."

TWENTY minutes later, Grempp was stretched out on the doctor's big table. Doc Cully pried a slug loose from Harry's chest and then took the patient's pulse. Then he said, "You're going to die, Harry."

Grempp stopped babbling and his eyes showed faint signs of shock. Five minutes later, Cully said, "You're going to die, Harry. You haven't got too long. I don't know exactly—"

Paint Harker looked at Sid. Sid grinned bleakly.

"Hear me, Grempp?" the doctor went on. "You are goin' to die."

It finally registered in Grempp's mind. He said, "Goin' t' die, doc? That what you said?"

"Reckon," the M.D. said solemnly. "Want me to git the preacher?"

"Hah!" Grempp coughed out. "If you want. Figure he might as well listen, too. I shot Joe Crain up on the Barred Diamond—range. He caught me with a runnin' iron—took my six-gun. I—had another—cached—near my saddle horn. I got him when he dropped his Colt back in the holster—yeah, you were right, Crain. I worked with Tunk Garvey—good idea—I figured—becomin' a churchman—nobody'd ever suspect. . . . How long I got, doc?"

"I'd say about three weeks," the Shelby doctor grinned. "Take about that time for the law up there to come here an' take you away, Harry, an' hang you legal."

"Y' tricked me, you dirty—" Grempp tried to get off the table and the dressings on his wound worked loose and let the blood flow again. Burdick got Grempp by the shoulders and held him down. Paint Harker held Grempp's kicking feet while the doctor made sure Grempp would stay healthy long enough to hang.

"Plenty of witnesses," Sid Crain grinned. "I figured I better have a hideout gun myself, Paint. Couldn't risk makin' the same mistake Joe made. Fixed me up a shoulder holster. Store coat hid it nice. You notice how slick Harry was grabbin' that dummy gun? Fer a man who hated the things?"

"Looks like you owe Jube Moody somethin' too," Paint said. "An' Johnny Burdick. He hadn't been playin' sheriff ag'in, you'd still be figurin' how to kill Harry legal."

Sid Crain nodded. "Reckon the kid saved me from a rope. Paint, sooner or later I'd have—"

Harker said, "That gal I was dancin' with, Sid, she kept askin' who you was. Asked me why you left so quick. So I went out—she's Mack Sellen's daughter—"

"One thing at a time," Sid Crain grinned. "Right now I'm figurin' on seein' the parson about that vacancy in the vestry. We got to make this country more civilized, Paint. We got t' teach kids like Johnny Burdick not to want to become hellers with six-guns, don't you think?"

Paint Harker grinned back. He got up and put a hand on Sid's shoulder. "I'll tell her you'll be around, Sid. For keeps."

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 79)

1. A cutback is not a form of English saddle. A cutback is a left-over animal; one which has not been sold at the market.

2. DrylanderA farmer of irrigated land

Double shuffle...A change in bucking.

DehornA pugnacious drinker

DigTo cheat or gyp

3. If an old time Westerner offered you some moonshine, you would put some water on to boil. Moonshine is rice.

4. If you owned a *rosadero*, you would sleep on it. A *rosadero* is a bedroll.

5. True. Many cowpunchers to this day believe that if they are thrown by one bucking horse they will be thrown by two more. Bad luck, in this respect, is thought to run in threes.

6. Chances are you would rather be a *segundo* than a pratie. A *segundo* is the assistant ranch boss. A pratie is a potato.

7. In miner slang, a dough-boxer is a cook.

8. A splinter belly is a carpenter.

9. If a cowpuncher's horse steps into a prairie dog hole and falls, this is supposed to indicate that the puncher or a good friend is due to be "set down"—fired and forced to leave the ranch on foot.

10. Chances are you would put the *freno* on your pony. A *freno* is a bridle.

11. In old time Western slang, the word, "dashboard" means foot.

12. A snoozer is not an article of clothing. In reality, a snoozer is a shepherd.

13. True. The cowpuncher slang term for automobile is "scrongo."

14. SleeperA calf, unbranded but earmarked.

Arizona dragon.A gila monster

DogyA weak, yearling calf.

15. To the old buckskin frontiersman, the local doctor was always referred to as "epossum salts."

16. In the old days gamblers frequently carried a gold stud in the boot or shoe for two reasons. First, such a stud was thought to bring the bearer good luck. Secondly, if a gambler took a thorough cleaning, he always had his gold stud to provide him with funds enough to live on till the next lucky winning streak.

17. A horse is said to be "saged" when he has become crazed by eating sage brush or certain other desert or prairie plants.

18. You would think he was being teased or hazed in some manner. The term, "rawhided," refers to the good-natured horseplay which the West typically applies to the greenhorn.

19. False. A loose herd is not a herd of cattle that has become lost. It is a herd that is allowed to wander pretty much at random or over a large territory.

20. True. A hooligan is a twist of the lariat done in such a way that the rope seems to stand in an almost upright position.

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A GRAVE FOR EL DIABLO



By **PHILIP KETCHUM**

CHAPTER ONE

Long Trail

When Big Joe Bender set out on his last manhunt he turned in his badge—for a man who would dig a grave for the devil must be bigger than the law!

HE RODE into the mountain valley from the north, taking a hard and difficult way and following no trails, and he had allowed enough time for the trip to be sure and get there a day before he was expected. He got there two days before, spotted the cabin, studied the lay of the land, and then, leaving his horse back in the hills, found a place near the cabin where he could watch and wait. On the appointed day, no one came near the cabin. Night fell and there were no sounds in the hills save the sounds which be-



Red reared up, lifting the man, hurling him into the other guards.

longed there. Then as the hours lengthened a voice suddenly called his name from the darkness of the cabin's doorway.

Big Joe Bender got slowly to his feet and flexed his arms. He took a step toward the cabin, hesitated and then froze as the voice reached him again.

"Hey, Bender!" the man was calling. "Big Joe Bender! You're out there, I know. Come on in. What the hell are you afraid of?"

Joe Bender scowled. He did not move.

"Hey, Bender?" the voice called again.

Joe Bender nodded in the darkness. "Is that you, Red?" he asked finally.

The man who was in or near the cabin doorway chuckled. He called, "Sure, it's me. I'll go inside an' light a lamp. You can come in with your guns out an' spittin' fire, or you can come in an' talk. Suit yourself."

Joe Bender sucked in a long, slow breath. He loosened the guns in his holsters.

Lamplight showed suddenly from the cabin's windows and from the open doorway. Joe Bender moved swiftly to the friendly shadows of the wall. He listened again, but could hear nothing unusual in the sounds of the night.

"Do I have to come out after you, Bender?" called the man inside the cabin.

Joe Bender stepped over to the doorway. He saw, just inside, a man as tall and broad-shouldered as himself; a younger man, who wore an impish grin, who had twinkling blue eyes and a shock of red hair. Twin guns sagged at the other's hips, but his hands were not near them and there was no one else in the one-room cabin.

"HELLO, Red," Joe Bender said quietly. The grin stayed on Red Garrigan's face. Joe Bender had once met him in

Juarez, below the border, where Red Garrigan had been safe from Texas law. Bender had hated him—as he hated all men who made this border country run red with blood—with an impersonal hatred, and had kept clear of a fight, just now, more out of curiosity than for any other reason. Garrigan had sent for him, and he wondered why an outlaw with a record like Garrigan's had wanted to see a Texas Ranger.

Garrigan said, "Bender, there isn't anyone within miles of here, but suppose I drape blankets over the windows, just the same, an' we close the door."

Joe Bender stepped inside and kicked the door shut. "Sure, Red," he agreed. "Drape your blankets any place you want to."

Red Garrigan turned his back on the ranger and fixed blankets over the windows. Joe wondered if he would have dared turn his own back on this man. A scowl came into his face. He rolled a cigarette and lit it and watched Garrigan and wondered about him. Garrigan he figured, was in his early twenties, at least ten years younger than he. He was weighing this, wondering how much longer one of them might live, if he called a show-down now, when Garrigan spoke.

"I guess you'd like to know why I wanted to see you, Bender," Garrigan remarked, turning away from the last window. "Do I just come out with it, all at once?"

Joe Bender nodded. "You might as well."

Garrigan took a seat at the table. "I need your help."

"You what?"

"I need your help."

Joe shook his head. "I'll help you into prison, Red. Or I'll help you into hell. Which is it?"

"Neither. I want your help in Mexico."

Joe Bender's lips tightened. He wondered if Garrigan had the crazy notion he could be bought. A flush of anger climbed into his face and showed in his deepening scowl.

Red Garrigan chuckled. He said, "Hey, fellow. Take it easy. Wait a minute. Wait until you get the whole story. Ever hear of John Stanford?"

Joe nodded, puzzled. John Stanford was one of the biggest ranchers along the border. In two days a man couldn't cross his range from any direction. Stanford numbered his cattle by the thousands. More than a hundred riders were on his payroll. The clustering buildings around his ranchhouse were more numerous than many a town. Stanford was a power in the state to be reckoned with.

"Stanford has a daughter, Bender," Red Garrigan continued. "Ten days ago she was kidnaped. She's being held for ransom—five hundred thousand dollars in gold. I know where she is. I know how we can get to her—

get her back—if you have the nerve to try."

Joe Bender's eyes narrowed. "Five hundred thousand dollars in gold," he repeated in disbelief. "There isn't that much gold in all of Texas."

Garrigan shrugged. "Maybe not. Maybe in the end they'll settle for cattle."

"Who'll settle for cattle?"

"The men who have her."

"Who are they?"

For the first time since Joe had entered the cabin the grin left Red Garrigan's face. "I'll name three," he said slowly. "Whitey Dant, Sol Leacomb, and the man who calls himself 'El Diablo' but whom you also know as Don Ramon Perez."

Joe Bender's eyes narrowed. He knew well the Mexican outlaw who went by the name El Diablo and he had come to suspect that below the border, El Diablo went by another name and lived a life of respectability. He had even once thought that El Diablo and Don Ramon Perez might be one and the same man, and here, if he could believe Red Garrigan, was an indication that he had been right. Whitey Dant and Sol Lecombe, he knew, too. They were even more wanted in Texas than the man to whom he was talking.

"I had a notion you might doubt the story," Red Garrigan went on. "And I can't prove that it's true. If you went to see John Stanford and repeated it to him, he'd deny it. If you asked to see his daughter, though, he couldn't show her to you. He might say she was away, or sick, or something like that. He's been scared to death, Bender. He's been told that if he reports the kidnaping he'll never see her again. He's been told that if he comes after her, all he'll find is her body. And if you knew John Stanford as I do you'd know that his cattle and his ranch mean nothing to him compared to Dora Stanford."

"How did you hear the story, Garrigan?"

"Through a friend."

"You're not in on the deal, huh—and so you're mad."

Red Garrigan jerked to his feet. He leaned toward the ranger. "Damn you, Bender," he grated. "If you feel that way, claw out your guns. I ride alone and you know it. An' I don't kidnap women."

A tight silence stretched out between the two men. Joe looked straight into Red Garrigan's eyes. They weren't a twinkling blue, now. They were like cold steel.

"Where did you say this girl is?" Bender asked.

"I haven't said, but I know."

"How deep into Mexico?"

"Not too deep."

"How many men are there?"

Garrigan relaxed a little. He shrugged. "Maybe fifty. Maybe a hundred. What dif-

ference does it make? Two men, if they go at it right, would stand a better chance of getting her out than an army. More would get in the way."

"So it's as simple as that."

"Hell—it's not simple at all. I said we'd stand a chance, Bender. We might neither of us come back."

Joe Bender rolled another cigarette. He said, "One thing more, Red. Why would you do this? What do you stand to gain by it?"

There was no change of expression on Red Garrigan's face. "Come to think of that—it's none of your damned business."

Joe Bender got to his feet. He took a turn around the room. The story was still as crazy as it had seemed when he had first heard it, yet for some strange reason he was coming to feel that there was something to it.

"As a ranger I would have no authority across the border," Joe said suddenly.

Red Garrigan shook his head. "I don't want your help as a ranger. I want your help as a man."

"And I still can't believe your story."

"Then ride with me and see."

Joe Bender grunted. "What I oughta do," he said quietly, "is take you in to the nearest sheriff."

Red Garrigan turned to face him. "Try that, now," he answered, "and it'll be my body you take in, or maybe leave your own here. But ride with me to Mexico, Bender, and I'll make you a bargain."

"What bargain?"

"If we get Dora and if we both get back, you can turn me over to the nearest sheriff on this side of the line. I won't lift a finger to stop you."

Joe Bender looked steadily at the outlaw. "You mean that?"

"I do."

Joe scowled. "When do we ride, Red?"

The grin came back to Red Garrigan's face. He stuck out his hand. He said, "Now, Joe Bender. Tonight."

DEEP in the green-covered hills, some thirty miles south of the Rio Grande, lay the town of Galeana. It was more than a hundred years old and was built around a plaza, wide and lined with stunted trees. On one side of the plaza were shops and cantinas, on another an old adobe church with high, twin towers. On a third was the government office and residence of the *alcalde* and the jail and on the fourth side was the walled residence of Don Ramon Perez.

Galeana had seen better days. Once this had been the greatest city north of the capital and the house of Don Ramon Perez had belonged to a noble family, high in the favor of the King of Spain. In those times, many a high titled figure had come to Galeana and had lived in the Residence. There had been fiestas and dancing almost every night. There had been laughter and song and Galeana had been a good place for a beggar and for merchants with costly wares and even for the peons, who could get a high price for the things they grew.

Why Galeana should have fallen upon evil times, those who lived there didn't know, but there were among them those who had recently taken heart and who believed that the good old days were soon to return. Don Ramon Perez, who some few years before had bought the Residence, showed signs of attempting to bring it back to its former glory. He as away a good part of the time, but when he was here there were again fiestas at the Residence and there was much singing and dancing and drinking and money flowed freely.

There were only a few, however, who deceived themselves as to Don Ramon Perez. Most of the old residents of the town suspected the missions which took him away and recognized, among his followers, a class of men of whom the old Galeana had never been proud. Juan Gutierrez, the *alcalde*, knew the truth, but he knew, also, that a word from Perez in the proper quarters in Mexico City

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would result in his removal from his post. Padre Francis knew the truth, also, and he would accept no gifts from Don Ramon, even for the poor fund. But it was not the way of the padre to talk about Don Ramon—he was quite old and did not get easily excited. He could see a chance for a long life full of good deeds for Don Ramon, could he get Don Ramon to change his ways.

For some days, now, Don Ramon had not been away and there were guests again at the Residence—men from above the border—though Galeana saw little of them. Word of two of these guests had trickled out, however. They were men who drank freely of wine and who were short of temper and on several occasions there had been trouble, which had been quietly hushed up. Galeana didn't even like to know of this trouble, but Don Ramon could not ignore it.

Don Ramon Perez characterized himself as a big man. He was, but much of his bigness was fat. He came, or so it was said, of a wealthy and respected family. He was almost swarthy of complexion. His eyes were little and dark and were almost buried in a puffy face. He wore a dark mustache and it was difficult to tell where his chin ceased and his thick neck began. He ate prodigiously, most of the day, and there seemed to be no end to his thirst. Wine, however, or even a stronger drink, had little apparent effect on him, and Lola Salazar, who had once been a singer at a famous cantina in Mexico City but who now lived at the Residence, occupying the questionable position of housekeeper, insisted that Don Ramon was never drunk.

Lola Salazar was an accomplished woman. She sang, danced, and perhaps could even cook—yet she, too, was restless with things impending within the Residence.

She was beautiful—dark, slender, with hair like midnight and dusky, violet eyes—yet she was hardly that on the day she suddenly burst into Don Ramon's room like a gust of cold wind. Anger flamed in her eyes and shone in two bright spots on her cheeks.

"You have seen her again!" she cried shrilly. "Perhaps you prefer the gringo woman to Lola. Perhaps you think you can send Lola away as you would a broken-down horse."

Don Ramon leaned back in the huge chair which had been specially made for him. An amused laugh rumbled from his throat. "She is worth money to me, *chiquita*. Money which you and I will spend. I but went to see that she was well."

Lola's eyes narrowed. She moved a step or two closer to Don Ramon.

"Could any take your place here?" Don Ramon asked softly.

The figure of a man showed up in the door-

way, a tall, thin man with a scowling face. He looked in at Lola and Don Ramon suspiciously. This was Whitey Dant and his look of suspicion was characteristic. He trusted no man. He dared trust none.

"How much longer we gonna have to wait?" he growled. "I don't like waitin'."

Lola jerked around to stare at Whitey Dant. Don Ramon blinked. For some time Whitey Dant had annoyed him. The man had been useful, it was true, but recently he was no longer so.

"Have you not been happy here?" Don Ramon asked a little sharply.

"What I want is money," Dant answered. "To hell with all this." He waved his arm vaguely.

Footsteps sounded on the stairway leading up from the open court within the walls. Whitey Dant's head turned toward the sound. His hand dropped to his gun, then fell away. A moment later Miguel Bustamente passed him and entered the room.

"Two men are riding south from the border, Don Ramon," he reported. "In another hour they will have reached the town."

A wide grin grew on Don Ramon's face. "Two men, huh? Do they come from John Stanford?"

"I think not, Don Ramon. They are men I know, though I have never before seen them riding together."

Don Ramon straightened up. "Who are they then, fool?"

"One is the man who is known as Red Gargigan, and the other—Joe Bender, the gringo ranger."

Whitey Dant sucked in a quick, sharp breath and his body went rigid. Don Ramon stood up, his mouth falling open. He stared hard at Miguel.

"Together?" he gasped. "Impossible!"

"I swear it by the Holy Virgin," said Miguel, crossing himself.

"And they ride this way?"

"Yes."

Don Ramon wiped a hand over his face. He managed a laugh but the laugh didn't sound quite right. Suddenly he straightened. "Lola," he ordered, "find Sol Leacomb and send him here. And Pedro and Juan. Whitey, come on in. We must prepare for our guests."

Lola Salazar hurried away. Whitey Dant stepped into the room. Alarm showed in his face.

"You think they know?" he asked huskily.

"Why else should they ride together?"

"If they know, others may know."

Don Ramon shook his head. He rubbed his chubby hands together and slowly a smile came into his face. "Yes, we shall prepare to welcome them," he said slowly. "And it shall be such a welcome as is fitting."

CHAPTER TWO

Galeana

WHEN they were about an hour's ride from Galeana Red Garrigan slowed down his horse and Joe Bender pulled up beside him. They rolled smokes and, while the horses continued on their way at a more leisurely gait, the two men had an opportunity for more talk.

"This way we will get there just at dusk," Red Garrigan mentioned. "It's a good hour. Gives us a chance to get a notion of what the place looks like and it is quickly followed by darkness."

Joe Bender nodded. He had been to Galeana before and he knew a little about the town and the Residence, but he could also understand Garrigan's meaning. What Garrigan was really after was the feel of the town, the attitude of the men there.

"They already know we are coming," Joe guessed.

Red Garrigan grinned. "Sure, they know. Miguel got a good look at us. I've a notion he recognized us both."

"And Don Ramon will guess why we've come?"

"Of course."

Big Joe Bender stared at this young man who rode beside him. "We might get shot before we get to the town," he said then.

"Might," Red agreed. "But it's not likely. Don Ramon likes to stage his murders like his raids. To drive off a herd of cattle with nobody watching wouldn't be worth while to him. Don Ramon likes to feint in one direction, strike in another, and follow with a cover-up which will fool the men who are after him. He won't want to kill us outright, Joe. He'll want to talk to us first."

Joe Bender scowled. "You're sure he has Dora Stanford here?" he asked for perhaps the fiftieth time.

"Sure of it?" Red grinned. "She is held in the second floor of the Residence, the third room down the hall from Don Ramon's. The windows of that room are barred. A peon who works there brought me a message from her."

Red Garrigan had never admitted as much before, and Joe Bender finished his cigarette in silence. "Then you know her, Red."

"Knew her once—long ago."

They rode on, not talking. Long ago, Joe Bender realized, couldn't have been very long ago, for the man beside him was young. And Dora Stanford was young. Where, he wondered, had this outlaw and the daughter of the wealthiest man in Texas known each other? How well? For the first time he wondered what it was, in the past, which had

driven Red Garrigan outside the law. What had held him there? He gave Joe Bender more of an impression of steadiness than of being wild. There was something solid to the young man, something someone should have been able to tie to—something someone probably had.

They were winding now through the rolling green hills, topped here and there by stunted trees. The sun was down. And now, suddenly before them, lay the town of Galeana, a sprawling settlement of adobe houses clustered about the twin towers of the church.

Red Garrigan looked over at him and grinned and said, "Well, Joe, here we are."

Big Joe Bender nodded. "Yes," he answered slowly, "here we are." And as he spoke he looked ahead at the town. It seemed, from this distance, peaceful and quiet. Yet blind odds, steeper than any he'd met, lurked within its shadows. He could sense that as distinctly as he might have been able to feel a cold north wind.

IT WAS still quite light when the two men rode into the plaza square and there were a good many men on the streets and in the park and here and there were a few women and children and many dogs. To the casual observer there would have been nothing unusual in the scene, but both Joe Bender and Red Garrigan marked the watchers along the streets. There were maybe a dozen, perhaps even more. They were trying to act normal, trying too hard. There was a tension in their attitudes which neither man could miss.

"The wolves are out," Joe said under his breath.

"But not running yet," Red answered.

Joe grunted. He glanced at the Residence but could see only the roof of it over the high stone wall. The gates stood open, seemingly unguarded.

The two men pulled up in front of the *alcalde's* house and, while Red Garrigan waited, Joe Bender dismounted and knocked on the door. This was a call made out of courtesy. It was a call Joe would have made had he come here in his official capacity, and perhaps it would bother Don Ramon a little.

The *alcalde* answered Joe's knock and frowned when he saw who stood outside, then quickly covered up with a smile.

Joe Bender shook his head. He was there, he told the *alcalde*, quite unofficially. He would probably stop at the Residence to see Don Ramon, and tomorrow, perhaps, would spend a few hours with Juan Guterrez. This was only a brief vacation. He was accompanied by a friend.

Juan Guterrez beamed on him and shook his hand heartily. He insisted that Joe Bender call on him the next day and have dinner with

him in the evening. Anything that Joe Bender wanted in the town of Galeana, he promised, was his for the asking.

The *alcalde* apparently, didn't know about Dora Stanford.

Joe Bender turned from the door and walked back to where Red Garrigan was tying the horses.

"We leave the horses here," Red told him, "There's a cantina—let's go in for a drink."

It was time for him to know more, and Joe Bender planted himself squarely in front of the other. "Why?"

"Men who've ridden a long way are thirsty." Red hesitated, then grinned. "Besides, from the back entrance to this cantina it is only a few steps to the wall around the Residence. Against that wall we will find a ladder."

"Placed there by this friend of yours."

"Yes."

"Any more surprises up your sleeve?" Bender growled.

Red Garrigan grinned. "One, maybe. If we live that long."

They started down the street, two big men apparently pleasure-bound and, as they walked they talked as men will do. But it was strange talk.

"There's going to be trouble when we try to leave the cantina by the back door," Joe suggested.

"Undoubtedly."

"And more trouble on the other side of the wall."

"Plenty of it."

"What do we do, Red, after we have climbed the wall?"

"Why we get to Don Ramon's room, make him hand over Dora, then take her and leave." Bender sighed. "As easily as that?"

Red shrugged and Joe Bender shook his head. He had walked into many a tough spot and walked out again, but he had never gone about it in as blithe a manner as this man at his side. He had always felt as he felt now, tense and with his nerves on edge.

They reached a cantina which was quite near a corner of the Residence wall and both ducked to enter the door which had been built for shorter men. The area inside wasn't large. There was a bar at one side of the room and a few tables against the walls. In the center was a space for dancing. There were not many patrons.

Red Garrigan headed straight for the bar and shouted for drinks for the house. He gulped at his beer and slapped Joe on the shoulder and laughed heartily.

Joe Bender finished his beer and ordered another. He was silently watchful. The men who had been in here when he and Red entered had hurried out, but others had come

in and had lined themselves around the walls, some standing, some sitting at the tables. Joe gave no indication that he noticed this.

The door to the back was not far from where they stood at the bar, but two men were standing near it, their hands close to their holstered guns. Four men lounged just outside the street door.

"Maybe we shoot our way out," Joe said, low.

Red Garrigan howled, as if at a joke. He said, "Maybe we do."

There was no one else in the cantina drinking, no one having any fun excepting the two big white men at the bar. The man behind it looked frightened. Those around the room were tense and still.

"Someone must be coming?" Bender breathed.

Red nodded and Joe said, "Suppose you start something."

Red Garrigan drew back. He suddenly screamed a curse and then swung on Joe Bender. His fist caught Joe high on the chest. It looked like a murderous blow and it really was a pretty stiff one. It sent Joe reeling backwards. He lost his balance and fell almost at the feet of the two men guarding the rear door.

Garrigan stared at him. Then as Joe started to get up he charged—veering abruptly as he neared Joe to take the guard to the right of the door.

Bender came up from his hands and knees to take the other, lifting him into the air and swinging him, screaming, towards men moving in from the street door.

"Here we go, Joe!" Red Garrigan shouted.

Red was out the door first but Joe Bender was right on his heels. They slammed the door shut against loud shouts of alarm and a spattering of bullets.

"Over to the wall," Red was calling.

Joe Bender turned back and drove two shots through the cantina's rear door. He heard a voice shouting from the front of the cantina, an American voice—Whitey Dant, he guessed. The voice switched to a poor Mexican dialect. It ordered that the two gringo murderers be caught. That meant him and Red Garrigan and Joe chuckled. It meant that they hadn't yet been ordered shot.

Red Garrigan said, "How d'you like this side of the law, Joe?"

IT WAS almost dark. To their right loomed the white wall around the Residence and even now Joe could see a ladder being lowered from the top. Red Garrigan was below and had caught it, pulled it out from the wall and was holding it there, looking back.

"What kept you?" he hissed.

"I'm right on your heels, Red," Joe Bender replied. "And why did you have to hit me so hard?"

"I had to make it look real. And if you think that was hard, wait till I really swing on you."

Joe Bender's grin was apparent in the half light. "What do you think I'll be doing while you're swinging?"

Red Garrigan laughed softly. He hurried up the ladder and flattened himself on the top of the wall. Joe joined him. They pulled the ladder up.

"The ladder'll reach that balcony," Red whispered.

The end of the balcony circling the second story rooms of the Residence was a little lower than the wall and only about fifteen feet away. It was a roofed balcony and ran all around this wing of the residence. From where they were the two men couldn't see into the patio but they could hear sounds from there and from the town's plaza. The rooms on this end of the building weren't lighted.

"Help me get this ladder over," Red grunted.

It was no easy task, lying there on the wall, but they made it. Then Red Garrigan crawled across the ladder and Joe Bender followed him. They pulled the ladder after them again and laid it close against the house.

"I'll bet we don't go back this way," Joe said under his breath.

Red Garrigan made no answer. Possibly Red didn't even hear him. Red had straightened up, had felt for his guns and loosened them in their holsters. That reminded Joe that he had fired one of his guns twice. He reloaded.

Footsteps sounded along the balcony from the patio side of the residence and both men pressed their bodies back against the wall. The footsteps stopped and then a whispered voice came to them, softly calling Garrigan's name.

"Filipe," Garrigan whispered back.

A young Mexican youth rounded the corner of the balcony. He had the slenderness of a girl and was breathing heavily.

"Well done, Filipe," Garrigan said quietly. "And Dora?"

"She is well, señor, but I could not get the key to her room and even now, men stand guard before it. There is nothing you can do."

Red Garrigan straightened. "We can do plenty. Where is Don Ramon?"

"A moment ago he was in the patio."

"Dant?"

"He has just come back from the plaza. Sól Leacomb is with him. They were talking to Don Ramon."

"How can we get to Don Ramon's room without being seen?"

"You can't, señor."

Red Garrigan frowned, then looked at Joe Bender. "What shall we do, Joe?"

Joe Bender shrugged. "If the point is to get to Don Ramon's room and we can't get there without being seen, why I guess we'll be seen, Red. Let's go."

Filipe caught his breath. "But—"

"Never mind, Filipe," Red broke in. "You keep out of it. You wait here."

Joe Bender moistened his lips. He had been a little surprised at his answer, but perhaps, he realized, he shouldn't have been. He was in this so deep already that there was no course, but to go ahead. Actually the answer had been simple. He turned and started around the balcony, Red Garrigan following him.

CHAPTER THREE

Chains

JOE BENDER paused briefly at the front end of this right wing of the Residence. From here he could see down into the patio. Lights from the house made the patio quite bright. He could see perhaps a dozen men. Not far inside the gate stood Don Ramon, Dant and Leacomb. Sol Leacomb was a little man, slightly stooped. He was about fifty. He had started his career in Texas as a gambler, but had been too handy with cards and too handy with his guns. Driven from one town after another he had at last found a place with the Mayhew band. When they had been broken up, he had escaped and had later been identified with a wild bunch in the panhandle country. A year before he had dropped out of sight.

Don Ramon, Dant and Leacomb suddenly broke up their conference and started toward the Residence. Joe Bender rounded the corner and started down the front of the right wing of the building. Red Garrigan was right behind him. They could both be seen from the patio, he knew, but it was shadowy up here and they might not be identified.

A dozen quick steps brought them to the turn and to the main part of the Residence. There had been no shout of warning. They hadn't yet been seen.

Joe Bender paused once more. It was still a dozen steps to Don Ramon's rooms and there were no shadows, now. Light shone from the windows of this main part of the Residence and a little beyond Don Ramon's room was the room in which Dora Stanford was held and before which two guards were standing. Another man was at the top of the steps from the patio, almost outside of Don

Ramon's door. Joe Bender kept standing.

"Let's keep movin', Joe," Red whispered.

By now, Joe figured, Don Ramon, Dant and Leacomb must be close to the stairway. There was a good chance they might take it and end up in Don Ramon's room. He rounded the corner and started boldly ahead. A door opened suddenly and Lola Salazar stepped out to the balcony.

She stepped out just as Joe Bender got there. A sharp, half-stifled scream came from her at the sight of him. Then Joe Bender reached out and smothered a second scream with his hand. He picked Lola Salazar up in his arms. She twisted, kicked—fought like a tiger.

The man at the top of the stairway gave a gasp of surprise. He tugged at his gun. Red Garrigan passed Joe Bender, running. He hit the man headlong and there was a sharp, brief struggle.

From the guards in front of Dora Stanford's door came a shout of alarm. They started toward Red Garrigan. The man Red had been struggling with had dropped to the floor of the balcony. Red stooped over to pick him up. A shot from one of the guards screamed above his head. Red reared up, lifting the man into the air. He pitched the body toward the charging guards, then plowed in after it. There was another shot, a scream, a second brief struggle, and then Red was moving back toward Don Ramon's room, dragging the two unconscious guards with him. The man he had hurled through the air he didn't need to bother with.

Joe Bender had the door to Don Ramon's room open. Lola Salazar was still kicking and clawing and trying to get free. From the patio, below, came the sounds of many men. Footsteps were even now climbing the stairway.

"In the room, Joe," Red said huskily. "An' slam the door after us. Pretty soon this is going to get interesting."

The lamps in Don Ramon's room weren't lit. Red Garrigan dragged the two guards through the door and Joe followed with Lola Salazar.

"I'm going to take my hand away from your mouth," he whispered into her ear. "If you scream I'll twist your neck."

He took his hand away and set Lola on the floor. Lola didn't scream but what she said to him wasn't very pretty. Across the room, Red tapped the guards over the head once more with the barrel of his gun, just to be sure they wouldn't wake up. After that he shoved them under Don Ramon's huge bed.

There was excitement out in the hall. Men were running back and forth, searching for them. Searching, first, probably, in Lola Salazar's room where the door was open and

then in the other rooms. They might have come into Don Ramon's room, but Don Ramon had taught them too well to respect his privacy.

Lola Salazar was still telling Big Joe Bender what she thought of him. Red Garrigan heard her and chuckled. Joe Bender scowled. He said, "Keep your voice down, woman—"

Lola's knife glistened in the faint light reaching in through the windows as she lifted it to lunge at Joe Bender but Red came up behind her and caught her wrist and held it. The knife clattered to the floor as Red's hand tightened. Lola started another scream but choked it off. She started to tremble suddenly, thoroughly frightened.

"Get over there and lie down and keep your mouth shut," Joe ordered. He turned Lola and gave her a slight push. Lola staggered as far as the bed and fell across it.

Joe Bender moved back towards the door. "I'll take one side," he whispered to Red. "You take the other."

Red Garrigan nodded. He stood back against the wall, waiting. Outside they could suddenly hear Don Ramon's voice, demanding explanations. The answers didn't seem to please him. After a moment the door knob turned and the door was pushed slightly open and Don Ramon peered into the room. Light from the partially opened doorway fell across the bed and showed Lola lying there. Lola turned over and sat up. She lifted her hands to her hair hesitantly and the sight of her seemed to assure Don Ramon. He opened the door wider.

"Come on in, Whitey," he ordered. "You, too, Sol. We've got the whole Residence covered. There isn't a chance they can get away or can get to the girl. I need a drink."

THE three men came into the room. Don Ramon headed for his table and struck a match to light the lamp. Sol Leacomb followed with him. Dant waited back near the door, seemingly nervous. He looked around and saw Joe Bender and Joe Bender's gun, covering him. He gasped and stiffened. Lamplight spread over the room as Don Ramon lowered the lamp's chimney over the flickering wick and Red Garrigan slowly closed the door.

"Steady, Don Ramon," he warned in Spanish. "And you, too, Sol. I've got some awfully hungry guns in my hand."

Don Ramon and Sol Leacomb jerked around to face the door. Sol sucked in a long slow breath but he didn't say anything. Don Ramon blinked, then moistened his thick lips with his tongue. He backed to his chair and sat down.

Suddenly Dant half screamed. "Damn you, I'll—"

"Shut up, Whitey," Don Ramon snapped. "It's all right. They'll never get away. They haven't a chance."

Joe Bender grinned. "Neither have you. Any of you. What do you think, Red? I can handle two if you can take care of the other."

"Hell, Joe. I can take all three myself," Red answered.

Don Ramon shook his head. "You want the girl. Not us. You want the girl but you'll never get her."

"Maybe you want her yourself," Joe suggested.

Lola Salazar was sitting up, taking all this in, her eyes shifting from one man to another. She was probably thinking harder than she had ever thought in her life.

"Red Garrigan and Big Joe Bender together," Sol Leacomb breathed. "I never thought I'd live to see it. Which one of you sold out to the other?"

"I reckon we both sold out, Sol," Red Garrigan chuckled. "I'm riding with the law and a ranger's riding with an outlaw. We're still arguing about who's on top."

Whitey Dant had backed to the center of the room so that he now stood near Sol Leacomb on one side of the table. Don Ramon was in his chair on the other side. Someone knocked on the door.

"Send him away, Ramon," Joe Bender ordered. "Send him away and be careful how you do it."

Don Ramon shrugged. He ordered the man to go away, lifting his voice to a shout. Then, reaching into his vest pocket he drew out a long, Mexican cigar. He examined it carefully and afterwards lit it.

"Any time you're ready," Joe suggested quietly, "you can send for Dora Stanford and have your horses saddled. We'll all want to be leaving here pretty soon."

Don Ramon shook his head. "You're not leaving."

"But we are, Ramon. Why fuss about it? Dora Stanford ain't worth a cent to you now and you know it."

Whitey Dant jerked a quick look at Don Ramon. "What's that?" he demanded. "What do you mean by that?"

"He's lying, Whitey," Don Ramon answered.

"Oh, no, I'm not," Joe said positively. "Stanford won't pay a cent for the girl and Ramon's known it for a week."

"You hear that, Sol?" Dant cried. "I knew it! I knew it!"

"The ranger's lying," Sol guessed.

Whitey Dant shook his head. "I ain't so sure of that. I think it's the truth. I didn't ever like the scheme, anyhow."

Lola Salazar got to her feet. "You came for the gringo woman?" she demanded.

Joe nodded. "We came for the gringo woman."

"Then I shall get her and order the horses," Lola offered. "I will be glad to see her gone."

Don Ramon looked around at Lola. "If you do that, Lola," he threatened, "you will go, too."

But Lola Salazar only laughed. "I shall get the girl and order the horses. And you shall not send me away from here, my Ramon, for I know too much about you."

Lola started for the door and, at a nod from Joe, Red Garrigan opened the door for her and stood aside. He closed the door after her.

"It will do no good to bring her here," Don Ramon shrugged, "or to order the horses. We shall none of us leave."

Joe Bender started to answer but Red beat him to it. "Suppose I handle this," Red suggested. And then facing Don Ramon, "I don't have any conscience, you know. I'd just as soon shoot you as look at you, Don Ramon Perez. Right after the girl gets here we are leaving, all of us. You will walk with the girl. Sol Leacomb and Whitey Dant will come next and Big Joe Bender and I will bring up the rear. You will tell your men that we have brought the money and that you are seeing us off on the journey home. And if there is any trouble or anything goes wrong I'll blast a hole in your back big enough to walk through. I don't mind shooting a man in the back, not at all. I guess you know that."

Ramon moistened his lips. He looked at Dant and then at Sol Leacomb. He took his cigar out of his mouth and studied it.

"I meant what I said, Don Ramon," Red said quietly, and for once there was nothing at all humorous or light in his tone of voice. And his voice was stony. "I meant just what I said. You make the choice. We all ride away from here or we'll settle things with our guns. Maybe we'll all die but you can at least be sure of one thing. You'll die first."

Don Ramon's puffy face was twisted into as much of a scowl as the fat would permit. He made no answer. A knock sounded on the door and Joe Bender heard Lola's voice in the hall. He stepped back and opened the door and Dora Stanford stepped into the room.

"The horses will be ready in a moment," Lola promised.

Joe Bender closed the door.

DORA STANFORD had stopped just a pace or two inside the room. She was staring at Red Garrigan and there were tears in her eyes. She said, "Red—Red—" And then she seemed to choke.

Red Garrigan didn't look around at her. He never took his eyes from Don Ramon.

Big Joe Bender stole a quick glance at the

girl. She was tall, slender, and had golden hair and a tanned skin. There were scratches on her arms and on her face, scratches several days old and not yet healed. She had been a handful, Joe guessed, for the men who had kidnapped her.

"Don Ramon," Red suggested, "you had better get up and offer the lady your arm."

Don Ramon blinked. He got slowly to his feet. "I'll not forget this, Garrigan," he said flatly.

Red Garrigan looked around at Dora. He said, "Hello, Dora. I came as soon as I could. We'll have a chance to talk later. Right now Don Ramon is going to walk you to the horses. I'll be just a little behind him. Don't worry at all. Your father is supposed to have paid the ransom."

Dora nodded. She said, "Red, I've been an awful fool."

"So was I," Red grinned.

Don Ramon moved over to the girl's side. He took her arm, led her to the door, opened it, spoke sharply to the men outside and then looked back. Joe Bender lined up Sol Leacomb and Whitey Dant and Red fell in with him, behind them. Don Ramon and the girl started on again and the rest of them followed. From the balcony Joe could see seven mounted horses held in readiness in the patio. Lola, apparently, was going along with them.

"Maybe we'll get away with this," he whispered to Red as they started down the stairs.

Red grunted. He said, "Maybe."

Joe Bender guessed that there were close to fifty men on the balcony and in the patio. They stood around watching what was happening. They seemed unusually silent. They were all armed. These were the riders, Joe figured, who went with Don Ramon when he set forth as El Diablo. They were a hard-bitten crew.

Don Ramon and Dora reached the patio and started for the horses. Whitey Dant and Sol Leacomb were just behind and close after them, Red and Joe Bender followed. There wasn't a sound within the patio. Lola Salazar had mounted one of the horses and was waiting. Men were holding the others. Don Ramon and Dora reached them and Don Ramon helped Dora to mount. Sol Leacomb and Whitey Dant headed for two of the horses.

Don Ramon screamed hoarsely, "Hold them! Do not let them get away!" and tried to swing behind the man holding his horse. Red Garrigan's gun snapped up and belched flame. Don Ramon screamed. He twisted half around and sat down.

"Head for the gate!" Red shouted.

He snapped a shot at Whitey Dant, caught the reins of one of the plunging horses and clawed into the saddle.

From every side now Don Ramon's men

were closing in. Sol Leacomb had gone for his gun. Joe Bender shot him in the shoulder. He had both his guns out and was spraying lead in two directions. The men who had been crowding in fell back. Bullets screamed over his head. He felt the sting of one across his arm.

Dora was riding for the gate but was looking back and shouting to Red to follow her. Red Garrigan was mounted, now. He swung his horse toward Big Joe Bender and leaning over, caught Joe under the arm.

"Come on, you crazy fool!" he yelled. "Do you want to stay here for the rest of your life?"

Joe swung up and held on. Dora was through the gate now but a dozen of Don Ramon's men were closing in on it. Red bent low over the saddle and the horse held its feet. The men at the gate scattered. Tied to a hitching rail outside, Joe Bender saw a saddled horse. He didn't know whose it was and he didn't care much just then. He dropped to the ground, began to run through dust kicked up by bullets.

He reached the animal, swung into the saddle and took out after Red and the girl. He caught them at the edge of town.

"What the hell kept you?" Red asked, looking around at him.

"I didn't like the idea of taking someone else's horse," Joe answered.

Red grinned. "That's right. You shouldn't have done it. It's against the law."

Big Joe Bender made no answer to that. A scowl came into his face. Before riding across the border with Red Garrigan he had mailed his badge and resignation to headquarters. This trip he had taken as a private citizen, yet he wasn't sure of his status as a private citizen.

He rode along behind Red and Dora and suddenly was aware of a stinging pain in his arm where a bullet had nicked him. He looked back. There was no sign of any pursuit and he didn't imagine there would be any. A shudder ran through him. They had made it and had escaped and, thinking back over what had happened, he didn't see how it had been possible. Yet that fight in the patio hadn't amounted to much and had been quickly over—it was hard for men to shoot straight in the half darkness and when they are too excited.

After a time Dora Stanford dropped back and rode with him while Red Garrigan led the way.

"I told him," Dora said, "that I wanted to thank you, and I do. But I want more than that. Why does Red have to take me home? He says he's agreed to do something with you. What is he talking about?"

Joe Bender scowled. "He made me a promise."

"What kind of a promise?"

"A promise to go some place with me."

"To jail?"

"Yes."

Dora turned her head to face Joe Bender. She said, "Mr. Bender, you don't understand about Red. It was my father who made him an outlaw. Red had a small ranch which my father gobbled up. When Red fought back, father called in the law. Red has never done half of the things he's been blamed for."

"Maybe not."

"He's no more of an outlaw than you are."

"Right now I'm afraid I'm pretty far outside the law myself."

"But you can't hold him to his pledge."

Big Joe Bender sighed. "I've got to, but first I've got to do something else. One month from tonight I'll expect Red to meet me where we met just before riding south. And he'll meet me there, Dora. You know it."

Dora Stanford bit her lips. "You—" she said thickly. "I hate you. I really hate you."

Just ahead were the broad, silvery waters of the Rio Grande. Joe called to Red to stop. He said, "Red, I'll take her home. I'm not ready for you, yet, and if you rode in with me there might be trouble. Suppose we meet one month from tonight at the cabin."

Red Garrigan drew in a long, slow breath. "One month from tonight," he agreed. "And thanks, Joe."

Dora reached out a hand to him but he didn't seem to see it. "Good-by, Dora," he added. "And good luck."

Turning then, he rode west, and from a little distance away looked back. Joe couldn't see his face but he had a notion that Red Garrigan's grin was gone.

ONCE again, a month later, Big Joe Bender and Red Garrigan sat facing each other in the cabin deep in the hills. Joe Bender looked tired. He looked as though he had ridden far and hard.

"When do we head in," Red Garrigan wanted to know.

Joe shrugged his shoulders. "There's no hurry."

"You were pretty sure I'd be here, weren't you?"

"Pretty sure. Yes."

Red Garrigan managed a grin, almost as good as normal. "We made a good team, anyhow, didn't we? There's no more El Diablo."

"Or Whitey Dant or Sol Leacomb. Or a few more."

There was a sound from outside the cabin and Red Garrigan jerked instinctively to his feet.

"Take it easy, Red," Big Joe Bender advised. "Those are your chains."

"My what!"

"Chains, Red. And I think you'll like them. You see, I've been looking into your record pretty closely. You're still wanted in a good many places in Texas, but most of the stuff against you can be written off the books—that is if you get away and stay away and behave yourself. So—"

Red Garrigan caught his breath. He was staring over Joe's head toward Dora Stanford who had just come in. And then suddenly he was past Joe and had the girl in his arms.

"I've got to warn you, Red, that she doesn't have a penny," Joe went on. "Just a horse and the clothes she's wearing, but she says it's all right with her, if it's all right with you. And her father took it hard but when Dora said something about a grandson he might have some day, the old man gave in. Say, are you two listening to me?"

They weren't. They were interested only in each other. And watching them Big Joe Bender was reminded of the girl who had been his wife and of Little Joe. An outlaw's bullets had killed them both and had started him on his career as a ranger. So long as he kept busy it wasn't bad but on still, lonesome nights and at times like this, old memories rose up to haunt him.

"Joe, why don't you ride with us?" Red said suddenly. "Like I said, we made a swell team. And the three of us—"

Big Joe Bender shook his head. "I've got things to do, kids," he said roughly. "Why don't you beat it? It's a long ride to a minister."



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DEEP IN THE SADDLE

Sheridan's big hands
dropped—his guns
rose and bucked. . . .

By
**CHUCK
MARTIN**



"Sheriff wants you in Dark Canyon," the saddle bum told Joe Sheridan. "A half-day's ride." But it was a year before Joe reached the rendezvous—a gunslick ghost of his former self, bent on taking three others to hell with him!

SHERIFF COLE BRADBURY watched Joe Sheridan from his office, directly across the street from the saddle shop. Then he said a little sadly, "Deep-in-the-saddle—sheriff never had a better deputy than Deep Sheridan!"

The girl in the office sighed, but made no other sound, and suddenly the sheriff swore. "I'll get that Barlow gang—or turn in my star!" Still the girl standing in the shadows did not answer, and presently the sheriff, too, fell silent.

Cole Bradbury was still a young man; not quite thirty-five. He had been sheriff of Laramie County for eight years, and Joe

Sheridan had been his deputy for three of those. Now, working night and day, Sheridan was making twice as much as the sheriff had paid him, but the bitter cast of his features was visible even across the street, as was the rig he had contrived, for moving about his shop. This consisted of a kack mounted on rollers on a six-by-six timber running the length of the shop. A catch-rope running through two pulleys was his means of locomotion, and he could ride that timber to reach anything in the place.

The sheriff growled low in his throat. The girl in the dusk-filled office stirred. *Twenty-four, and a cripple*, Bradbury thought. *Five feet eleven, and a hundred and eighty pounds of stove-up bone and muscle*. Sure, Sheridan was still in the saddle all day and half the night, as he had always been since he was big enough to straddle a kack. But he had aged past his years.

Bradbury's mind went back to the bush-whack which had crippled his deputy. He and Joe had tried for a year to catch the Barlow gang of outlaws which had holed up in the Wyoming badlands, and had robbed banks and ranchers with almost monotonous success. He had been called to a distant town on a rustling complaint, and had told Sheridan to ride herd on the office until the next day. And two hours after Bradbury had jingled out of town a saddle tramp had brought a message to the office for Sheridan. The stranger had told Sheridan that Sheriff Bradbury wanted him to saddle up at once and meet him in Dark Canyon, near a stand of juniper trees, where Wildcat Creek made a fork. He had added that the Barlow gang was headed towards Laramie, and that Bradbury had ridden into a trap.

Sheridan had gone into the badlands—and ridden into crossfire from hidden rifles. One bullet had got him in the left shoulder; another had drilled his left hip at the same time. The third slug had killed the big grulla he rode, and the horse had fallen in the middle of a frantic jump across a deep crack, pinning Sheridan under him.

Cole Bradbury had told him that he was still deep in the saddle when they found him just before sundown. Sheridan had answered that he bruised easy, but healed quick, but he hadn't been able to walk when he was discharged from the hospital.

Old John Boster, for whom Sheridan had ridden the rough string, before pinning on a law badge, and his daughter, Darlene, had taken him to the Box B where Darlene had nursed him back to health. The Bosters had called a specialist to look him over, but nothing had finally come of that, as far as Bradbury knew.

Or had it—the sheriff turned suddenly to-

wards the shadows where the girl had been standing. "Darlene—" he began.

But she was gone.

DEEP SHERIDAN glanced up when the front door to his shop opened. Darlene Boster smiled at him; took his big right hand when Sheridan bent again to his work.

"Look at me, Deep," the girl said wistfully.

"Busy," Sheridan grunted.

"You—you big lump," the girl whispered. There were tears in her eyes.

"Yeah," Sheridan said, and his deep voice was bitter, with also a touch of weariness. "If that's what you came to say, you might as well go."

"Joe," the girl said. "You've got friends. Dad and I want to help you—and Cole loves you like a brother."

Sheridan looked up at last. There was a faint, twisted grin on his lips. He said with rough deliberation, "Good night, sister," and then flushed at the deep hurt in the girl's brimming brown eyes.

He started to reach out a hand, withdrew it, put it back to his task. He wanted to reach out his hungry arms—strong big arms that could lift his crippled body with ridiculous ease, but he kept them gripping the tooled leather.

He was aware of the girl watching him—but what she did then took him by surprise. She reached out and gripped him by both powerful shoulders. She shook him, and Sheridan gasped. His eyes widened, half in anger, half in amazement as her voice suddenly lashed him.

"You don't want pity, but you brood all day long, feeling sorry for yourself, Joe Sheridan. You haven't got anything that the doctors can't cure, but you won't help yourself, or let anyone else help you. Good-night, Mister Sheridan!"

He stared as she stomped from the little shop into the night. An expression of wonderment spread across his rugged face, and then his gray eyes began to dance. The smile spread to his generous mouth, and the deep lines of pain were lost in the laugh wrinkles which made Deep Sheridan look his age again.

"I'll be a cow's flunky—" he began, and that sobered him again.

He straightened a bit in the saddle on the square timber. A spasm of pain shot up his spine and brought beads of cold perspiration out on his forehead. The pain eased up some when he leaned back.

It was so Cole Bradbury found him a moment later, as he walked into the saddle-shop stiff-legged. Because he had his brush-coat buttoned to the neck, Joe Sheridan knew that Bradbury was going on a trip. The sheriff's

horse was tied to the rail across the street in front of the jail, and a thirty-gun rode in the saddle-scabbard under the left fender. There was also a bed roll tied behind the cantle, and a slicker tied with the saddle-strings.

Sheridan glanced at the little clock on his bench. It was ten o'clock in the morning, and the saddle-maker wanted an excuse to get farther away from the man who loved him like a brother. His left hand grasped a rope and pulled gently, and the saddle rolled back to the far end of the shop. Sheridan reached for the coffee pot on the stove and set out two cups.

"Cup of Java?" he asked tonelessly.

Cole Bradbury was a big man, an inch taller than six feet. He was strongly built, but not near as wide through the shoulders as his former deputy. His blue eyes were steady and patient with understanding, and he spoke softly.

"Don't mind if I do, Deep. Nothing like a cup of good hot coffee to help a man with his thinking."

"Don't tell me; just keep on thinking," Sheridan answered roughly, but he filled two cups with the steaming fluid. "Help yoreself to the sugar, sheriff."

"Yeah, sheriff," Bradbury said thoughtfully, as he sat on the work bench near Sheridan. Then he added, "Remember, I never accepted your resignation. You're still my deputy, Deep, and you'll take orders from me!"

Sheridan looked up over his cup of coffee. His eyes studied the older man's face for a long moment. He seemed about to speak, but something in the sheriff's face made Sheridan hold his tongue.

"You ain't giving me any orders," was all he finally answered.

"It's the Barlow gang," Bradbury stated quietly. "They're heading towards Laramie again, and I heard it 'round about that they mean to tally for the law in this county!"

"Same being you," Sheridan answered through stiff lips, but a flush of color stained his face.

"You and me," Bradbury corrected. "I thought you'd want to know. I found out who that saddle-tramp was who brought you that phoney message from me."

Deep Sheridan raised up in his saddle, and a groan escaped from his lips when the old pain shot through his crippled spine. Both big hands went down to the brace of .45 six-shooters seated deep in the holsters on his helpless legs. His voice was a humming buzz.

"Who?"

"Ed Tillson," the sheriff said. "It was him who got you through the hip."

"That—" Sheridan grunted, as he leaned back against the high cantle of his hand-made saddle. "Who shot my hoss?"

"Speed Barlow," Bradbury answered. "He

tells it scarey that he's coming back to finish what he started!"

"He's coming here?" Sheridan whispered thinly. "Speed Barlow is going to bring it to me?"

"That's what he said," Bradbury affirmed. "Thought you'd like to know."

"I can take care of myself," Sheridan said coldly. "And I don't have to wear a law star to do it!"

"Have it your way," the sheriff answered gently. "Only I thought I'd ask you to kinda keep an eye on my office across the way, while I'm gone."

Deep Sheridan's eyes were burning. He seemed scarcely to be listening. "If I could only get on a hoss. . . ."

"You'll ride again some day, Deep," Bradbury answered with conviction. "But until you do, your name is still on the law-book as my deputy. You'll help a pard that much, and pin on the star?"

This time Sheridan heard him. "Yeah," he answered bitterly. "When I sit saddle on a horse again!"

HORSES were coming into town from the west, and Deep Sheridan glanced at his clock. It pointed to three. The afternoon sun was blazing hot. Sheridan glanced into a mirror, one of a pair which were placed in the shop window on each side. Just another little convenience the saddle-maker had rigged up for himself, so he could see up and down the street, east and west.

"Strangers," Sheridan murmured, as he studied the three men straddling big mountain horses. Trained to read each little sign, Sheridan sat up straight when he saw the brand on the left hip of a big bay. It was the Box B, and the horse was old John Boster's personal mount.

His look half apprehensive now, Sheridan settled deep in the saddle again to ease the pain his sudden movement had cost. Then his narrowed eyes changed from gray to a smoky amber as he recognized the rider on the big bay horse. It was the saddle-tramp who had brought him the phoney message which had led him into the bushwhack trap in Dark Canyon! The name came to him from his talk with Bradbury.

"Ed Tillson!" Sheridan whispered.

A fierce burning anger seized the crippled man as he stared into the mirror and watched the three outlaws ride boldly up the main street. The lathy gent with the handle-bar mustaches would then be Jud Frang, and his tall pard with the brace of cutters tied low on his long legs would be Speed Barlow himself. All three were straddling Box B horses. Knowing old John Boster, Sheridan knew that the horses had been stolen. Had anything hap-

pened to old John—or to Darlene Boster?" And what about Cole Bradbury? Had Cole ridden blindly into the same bushwhack the three outlaws had baited for Deep Sheridan less than a year ago?

Sheridan watched the mirror, and his two big hands slipped down to loosen the guns in his holsters. When the pain kept him awake at night, he had sat on that rafter, practicing for speed. He had always been fast, but the past six pain-filled months had taught him to shed leather like a flash of heat lightning.

Speed Barlow had stopped his claybank at the corner from which he could watch the two streets in each direction. Jud Frang and Ed Tillson turned away from the main street and rode north up Second Street. They faded quickly from the frame of the mirror into which Deep Sheridan was staring, leaving Barlow acting as a look-out.

Sheridan moistened his lips and tried to figure the play. There were few people on the streets, and most of them were women doing their shopping. The seconds ticked away as the saddle-maker watched Speed Barlow suddenly raise his left hand in a signal.

Now there were two men framed in the mirror as Jud Frang rode out of an alley and dismounted to tie his horse with trailing whangs. Frang was between Barlow and the saddle shop, and he loosed his six-shooters as he stepped to the high board walk.

Deep Sheridan copied the move and slid both guns in his well-oiled holsters. Something caused him to turn his head, and then he saw a movement reflected in the opposite mirror. Ed Tillson was coming down the board walk from the east, and now Sheridan had his answer.

The play was for him! He was to be the victim of a deadly cross-fire.

The little shop was only twenty feet wide, and thirty feet long. The big six-by-six rafter ran the whole length of the shop, directly in

the middle. The wide doorway was flanked by two display windows, and he was like the door—squarely in the middle.

On the east and west walls of the two windows hung the two wide mirrors. The outlaws couldn't know about those mirrors which furnished Sheridan an unobstructed view up and down the main street. They were his only advantage—through them he could spot the double play and choose his own time for action.

Sheridan leaned back and hooked his high-heeled boots in the broad stirrups. He saw Jud Frang slow his pace, Ed Tillson lengthen his stride. Both men were walking lightly to keep their spurs from chiming, and then in the east mirror, Sheridan saw Speed Barlow step his horse up and ride to the alley where Frang's horse waited.

Sheridan caught a quick breath when he saw Barlow swing down from the saddle. The outlaw leader was evidently leaving nothing to chance, and meant to copper a sure bet. Now Barlow was on the board walk, trailing Frang at a distance.

Deep Sheridan glanced at the other mirror and saw Ed Tillson signal to Jud Frang. The two killers were perhaps fifty feet from the shop, coming from opposite directions, and would meet at the wide, open door. They would not try to fire through the windows, for the interior of the shop was dark. The pattern they would follow then was simple.

Tillson and Frang would swing swiftly through the door together, and would then fan quickly to either side to make separate targets. They would direct the deadly cross-fire against their victim, with Speed Barlow in the street to take care of any local interference.

Deep Sheridan glanced in both mirrors, and his face hardened. No one was on the street except the three would-be killers. A little spasm of pain shot up from his spine to re-



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mind him of the months of helplessness. Months during which he had been only half a man—and then a curious smile touched his lips, as he realized that it was those months that were giving him his advantage now.

A strange feeling of exultation swept over him as he waited, his eyes on the tell-tale mirrors, his hands hovering over his guns. Forewarned by his own helplessness, he could predict the exact second when the two men crossed the twin windows.

Ed Tillson and Jud Frang leaped away from the protecting store-fronts and crossed his vision. Their guns were already out when they met in the doorway. Then they were through and into the shop. . . .

Sheridan's big hands dropped in the lightning gesture born of sleepless hate-filled nights. Even as his sixes tilted up he thought, *I could have killed you before you knew you were in a fight—I'm giving you a break. . . .*

Then the thunder gusted from his hands, filled the shop. Ed Tillson took the slug from Sheridan's right-hand gun, and his own triggered a bullet into the low ceiling before he could chop down to find his sights.

Jud Frang jerked back with a slug through the right arm before his six-shooter could come up. He blasted a shot into the splintered planking, caught his balance as he swung up the spare in his left hand.

Deep Sheridan had caught his bucking guns on the recoil, and his right-hand gun roared throatily. Frank pitched forward to lie on top of Tillson, under the big rafter.

SHERIDAN jerked his head up for a look in the mirror on the east wall. His eyes widened when he saw Speed Barlow living up to his front handle, legging it for his ground-tied horse. Sheridan grabbed the rope which hung from the ceiling, gave it a yank, and his mounted saddle sped up to the front of the shop on the big rafter.

Deep Sheridan was spurring like a man on a horse when his saddle came to the end of the rafter and stopped against the chock-blocks. He could see Speed Barlow in the mirror, but he couldn't go any farther than the end of the rafter. Barlow vaulted to the Box B horse and dug in his spurs, while Sheridan strained desperately against his bonds of helplessness.

What he did then came out of that despair, out of the hate that had all but consumed him during the past bitter months. He swung his right leg behind the saddle, putting all his weight on the crippled left leg—then he was lying on the floor, with the devils of pain stabbing through his injured spine.

Catching a grip on the rafter, Sheridan pulled himself up and tried to stand erect. He was bent over at the hips, and his left leg

sprawled out in front of him like a flexible hose. Sheridan threw the crippled leg in front of him and stepped up with the right, and then he was on the board walk.

"Deep!" an agonized voice called, and Darlene Boster came running across the street from the sheriff's office. "The shooting, Deep—"

Deep Sheridan braced himself like a great wounded spider. The lines of suffering were etched deep into his face, and his mouth was twisted and awry with pain. But he managed to hobble to the hitchrack.

Then the girl was beside him, her hand on his arm. "But you can't ride—"

Without answering, he fumbled in his vest pocket. He brought out a tarnished law star, pinned it to the left side of his vest, and took a deep breath.

The girl's eyes widened and she went to the head of the horse. She knew what to do without telling. She turned loose the reins just as Sheridan made his swing, pulling with his left arm. The horse took a forward step as Sheridan's right leg flashed behind and across its flank, and then Sheridan was in the saddle.

He snugged his boots in the familiar ox-bows and pressed the small of his back against the high cantle. Beads of sweat stood out on his white forehead, but in the saddle, Sheridan looked far from being a cripple. He was at home again, and the feel of the horse between his knees gave him a new surge of confidence and strength.

"I'm riding to Dark Canyon on Wildcat Creek," Sheridan told the girl gruffly. Then he nudged with his good right leg and put the stout mountain horse into a dead run.

DEEP SHERIDAN rode into the badlands and saw the shimmer of Wildcat Creek where the red rays of a setting sun reflected on the water. Once he had seen a horse-backer topping a hogback in the distance, and he knew that if the rider were Speed Barlow, the outlaw would bait another trap.

It didn't matter, he thought grimly. Darlene and Sheriff Cole Bradbury made a fine looking pair. And it was hell to see the shadows the sight of himself put in the girl's eyes—worse than the hell it was sitting the deep saddle again.

He came to Wildcat Creek and started up the trail to the mesa, his eyes smouldering with pain, with fires that had long been banked, and were about to erupt into renewed life.

Halfway up the mesa trail, two shots rang out in the still twilight air. One of those shots came from a rifle; the other from a six-shooter. The brush began to crackle from around the bend, and then the body of a man slid to a

stop in the trail-side brush and he knew then.

Sheridan's nostrils were flaring as the smell of burning powder came from the breeze. He turned his head and lowered his eyes, and his left hand went up to touch the tarnished law-star on his vest.

The man beside the trail was Cole Bradbury!

A splotch of red was spreading across the sheriff's white shirt, high up on the left side. A rifle had slid down beside the officer, and Sheridan had found another answer. Speed Barlow, up on the mesa, had only a six-shooter.

Sheridan settled himself in the saddle and made ready to continue his climb. Then he stopped. Some one was coming down the trail!

Deep Sheridan leaned back against his high cantle. He waited, his wide shoulders loose and relaxed, arms hanging free. The throbbing agony in his being receded, driven back by the realization that he'd reached the end of his ride—probably also the end of his pain.

The ears of a horse twitched above the brush, and then a tall rider swung into view. Speed Barlow jerked back on the bridle-reins with his left hand—then both hands fell to his guns. Deep Sheridan sat like a part of his saddle on the motionless horse. He timed it close—he wanted to kill Barlow, but he wanted not to have to face the girl again, too. Then his right hand seemed to flick down and up without effort, and orange flame tipped the muzzle of his leaping six-shooter.

Speed Barlow's right hand gun blazed just as he jerked back and spilled over the cantle of his saddle.

Deep Sheridan's horse reared high with a scream of mortal agony. Sheridan, stunned and horror-stricken, saw it coming, but his muscles refused to obey. The wounded horse crashed down, rolled over him, and long before it had twitched out its last move, the man underneath had gone motionless.

DEEP SHERIDAN stirred restlessly and crinkled up his nose. A soft cool hand touched his forehead, and Sheridan opened his eyes. Darlene was smiling down at him, and the odor of medicine was strong.

"The sher'ff," Sheridan heard himself murmur. "He was shot up bad. What am I doing in bed?"

"Cole Bradbury is all right," Darlene answered soothingly. "You're in the hospital, Joe. They operated—"

"Operated!" Sheridan echoed, and then he scowled. "Barlow killed my hoss, but I got him first. Hope you and Cole will be happy!"

"You've been here four days," Darlene said gently. "Please don't argue, deputy. Cole Bradbury collected your reward for the Barlow gang—money you wouldn't take from father and me—and it paid for your operation. Cole wants to be our best man."

Deep Sheridan listened and closed his eyes. It was hard to believe. When he left the hospital, he would be as straight as other men. Darlene—the money he'd tried to save for this operation, by working night and day. . . . After a while he opened his eyes and reached for the girl's hand.

"You mean you still want to marry me, Darlene?" he asked in a whisper. She leaned close to him, and her soft lips found his.

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(Continued from page 6)

By 1859 the bounty had risen. The Mexican government was then offering \$100 in gold for a warrior's scalp, \$50 for a squaw's and \$25 for a child's in an effort to exterminate the Indian menace. The United States government was doing its share by instructing soldiers to do everything in their power to stamp out hostile bands, sparing neither squaws nor children. Thus the Apaches found themselves in the position of hunted animals and answered the challenge by baring their fangs.

A tall, statuesque warrior named Mangus-Colorado was at that time hereditary chief of the Apaches. In 1863 he entered into an agreement with United States troops whereby he was promised the "luxuries" of reservation life in return for his surrender and the cessation of hostilities. But when he had handed over his arms and let himself be conducted to the reservation, he was thrown into the guard-house with the warning that he would be shot down if he tried to escape.

So he didn't try. Instead he laid down on the narrow bunk and tried to forget his humiliation in sleep. But the impatient soldiers prodded him with a red-hot bayonet, and when he jumped up in fright and pain, coolly shot him down "in the line of duty." Later the chief's excised brain was found to weigh more than Daniel Webster's and his skull was sent to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington.

THIS incident did not strengthen Geronimo's confidence in the promises of the white man, and the comforts of life on the San Carlos Reservation lost much of their appeal when, to quote an authenticated account, "A large party of whites left Tucson on the 28th of April, 1871, surprised the Apache camp at daybreak, shot sleeping women, beat out the brains of the wounded, hacked children to pieces and stripped the bodies of the slain."

It was not long after this that Geronimo became the terror of the great Southwest. Profiting by the example of the pale-faced newcomers, he and his band of Apache braves began their fearless and savage assaults on white travelers, shooting them on sight and carrying off what spoils they needed.

The settlers and soldiers were no match for the Apaches' cunning. The terrain was rocky and unfamiliar and the hostile Indians were past masters of guerrilla warfare. Apache outrages and depredations followed in quick and terrifying succession and finally word came from Washington that Geronimo must be stopped at any cost.

But it was no easy task. Indian raids continued into the early seventies, during which



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MAGAZINE, 250 Sportsman's Bldg., Boston, Mass.

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

time Geronimo harried the old Overland Stage Road between El Paso and San Diego, ruthlessly robbing mails and passengers. But though ruthless as a warrior, Geronimo was not unnecessarily cruel. He claimed that no victims of his had ever been mutilated, except those scalped after a battle; nor was anyone tortured except when he withheld important information.

Finding that they could not take Geronimo by force, the United States government officials decided to use cunning. In 1879 a Captain Gaskell met the chief by appointment at Fort Brucker and persuaded him to try out the peaceful life on the reservation at San Carlos.

Tempted by the picture Gaskell painted, perhaps tired of the eternal wars with the whites, Geronimo consented. He made many stipulations, which were speedily granted, Gaskell agreeing to anything that would take Geronimo out of circulation. In accordance with the terms the Apache war-chief led an easy and comparatively independent life at the reservation, coming and going when he wished. Thus for two years he remained at peace with the United States.

In 1881, however, a medicine man at the San Carlos reservation began preaching an Indian doctrine, in which all Apache heroes would be resurrected to conquer the world. In the excitement which followed government troops were called in. The medicine man was finally quieted with a shot through the head.

But the old fire of revenge again burned in Geronimo's veins, and with a large band of men, women and children he left San Carlos and fled into Mexico. A self-important, but ineffectual, posse from Tombstone failed utterly to find any trace of the Apache fugitives.

To General George Crook, in command of the Arizona Territory, was assigned the difficult task of bringing Geronimo to terms. Finally, in 1883, another parley was arranged. Again the great warrior was lured into submission with promises of an easy life as a government charge—and again he accepted—on his own terms.

For two more years he led an exemplary life on the reservation. Then, once more dissatisfied with his treatment, he took to the warpath with Mangas, the son of Mangas-Colorado, and a choice collection of braves.

As if to make up for lost time, the marauders soon had committed seventy-five separate murders, thirty-eight of which are credited to the raids of the Bloody Eleven, whose ranks were eventually depleted to a Bloody Ten. Geronimo was not among this group, but he may safely be said to have helped in the general havoc.

IN AUGUST, 1885, all of Geronimo's equipment was captured, along with fifteen Apache squaws. His forces were thus seriously handicapped. But even so he kept successfully beyond the reach of the white soldiers and continued to make all Arizona tremble in fear.

Again, in 1886, General Crook arranged a conference. Again Geronimo was lured into a conditional surrender and again he felt the white man had lived up to his name by proving false. He made his escape, but his entire family were detained and subsequently transported to Fort Marion in Florida.

Having failed so spectacularly on two occasions, Crook was replaced by General Nelson A. Miles, who immediately took the trail of the remaining renegades with 3000 soldiers and 300 paid Indian scouts. All summer Miles pursued the handful of fugitives, but Geronimo was more than a match for his pursuers and lost only one of his men.

August found Miles no nearer success than before—and more than ready to discuss the matter in a gentlemanly fashion once more with Geronimo!

It would appear that both sides had been burned often enough to keep away from the fires of mutual pow-wows, but a meeting was

arranged in Skeleton Canyon and Miles, who had hoped to effect at least an unconditional surrender, found himself rapidly acquiescing to all of Geronimo's terms.

He agreed that the past would be wiped out; that on the reservation Geronimo would have all the privileges and prerogatives of an Apache war-chief; and that he would be allowed to visit his family in Florida. This final condition persuaded Geronimo to surrender and he proudly accepted the terms he himself had dictated.

Geronimo's later life is a tragic anti-climax. He was ultimately reunited with his family, but the hot, moist climate of Florida and later of Alabama, proved unhealthy to the hard-tempered constitutions of the Apaches and one by one they sickened and died. Finally Geronimo, and a few survivors were belatedly transported to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where they lived out the rest of their days.

Geronimo grew old and fat. He adopted shapeless hats and ill-fitting trousers in pathetic imitation of Eastern dress. He learned with difficulty to letter out his name and managed to sell tourists autographed photographs for a dime or home-made bow and arrow sets for a quarter.

Finally, in 1909, he died.



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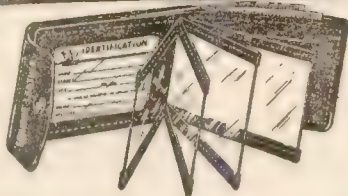
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 58)

There's a touch of fever still, I think. You'll see things today that won't be there tomorrow. I've got no claim in Frio. I've got no kids, and I always squint when I don't wear my glasses. My name is Harris, Professor Amos Harris, of Denver. If you're ever down that way—"

Manning reached his hand up and gripped Casey's. His eyes rimmed with moisture.

"By hell, Drum—Professor," he choked, "I'll make it right some day!"

Casey grinned.

"All right, Manning. Some day," he said.

The woman roused a little later. Manning was sleeping again and in comfort. The bad part was done. The woman gripped Casey's hand. Casey left the whiskey, swore that he had nothing better, and mounted.

He could have waited for morning. Night made dim trails even more obscure to his troubled eyes, but a grim impatience was in him. There were some gents in Frio who needed a cure and, half-blinded or no, Casey Drummond was the man who could handle the curing. After that, there was a long ride home.

And down there on a gift section, in a house of good timber and a palace compared to the one he was just leaving, was a woman with whom he had argued, a woman who had been right. A man could do only so much. Beyond that he had to have faith.

And somehow, Casey was certain that little Danny would walk again. He had to. If the Timberline Kid and a percentage girl could face the black numbers which had rolled up against them and still cling together, the Drummonds had no call to buck fate.

Time, Mary had said.

Time and faith.

These were things which fate and no enemy could take from a man and his woman.

Casey was coming home empty-handed. He would leave the five hundred dollars and a lesson they would not forget with the Frio ranchers. But one day he would tell Danny the story of this ride—and it would be enough.

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SIX-GUN SINNER

(Continued from page 78)

in a compact bunch, not spreading out, but holding steadfastly to the cattle trail. They topped a hogback ridge finally whose far slope was dotted with scrub and live oak trees. Viewing the yonder valley from this vantage point, Bicknell held up his hand for another halt. He pointed triumphantly. The flat valley at their feet was almost filled with a broad column of slowly drifting cows!

McClune gasped, "By grabs, there's three thousand in that herd or I'll eat a coyote, hair an' hide!"

The rest of the party pressed in close to take a look. Bicknell got down to tighten up his cinch. The other men looked eagerly to him for their orders. McClune and Shawn examined their six-guns carefully. Other riders worked rifle breech blocks and loaded magazines. Bicknell remounted.

They dropped into a shallow cup, traveling swiftly, silently, through moonlight as bright as day. Now they were screened by another rising ridge. Bicknell picked the way and led the rest without uttering one word. The low bawling of the herd came clearly from the right—the cattle sounded tired and thirsty and therefore would be a difficult herd to cut.

They rode on, passing through a grove of junipers, breaking out suddenly into the valley some three or four hundred yards from the lumbering lead steers. Four riders were in sight: Two at the point, one a hundred feet down the flank, another almost opposite Bicknell and his men. This rider yelled, "Hey, Lon, look out!" and pointed with his hand.

Bicknell said, "Spread out now, boys. Shawn, go up with Dan and Till and stop the herd. I'll find the ramrod of this shebang!"

The rider directly behind the point men kicked heels against his big red horse and came back a little way to shout, "Halt."

Bicknell made no reply but rode the man down slowly, deliberately. "Where's your trail boss, friend?" he asked when he got up close and stopped.

"Who the hell wants to know?" the man demanded suspiciously.

"Never mind. Get him up here pronto or I'll crawl your hump!"

Another yell came from down the line of moving steers; and two more riders were suddenly racking up through a haze of dust. The rider in front of Bicknell held in his horse. "Here he comes now. And yuh asked fer what you're goin' to git!"

Bicknell neck-reined his sorrel, started the horse down along the flank, pointing it straight for the two new riders coming up at a long, high lope. Now there was no mistaking the solid manner in which one of those men sat



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

on his mount. Even in this hazy light, the man's teeth set up a flash, and he jerked his neckpiece down and called, "Keep back! If that's you, Bicknell, call off your dogs! We got yuh four to one!"

"I'll call your bluff, Ramsey," Bicknell answered grimly. "Your lead!"

Ramsey came on, sitting straight and loose in his kack, his sloping shoulders hunched a bit, his big head held a little forward on his solid neck. The second rider was Harry Horne, but he hung back a bit, warily looking to right and left, patently as spooky as a yearling steer. Ramsey stopped his roan a hundred feet away, and Horne stopped, too. In back of Bicknell, Shawn and three men formed a line across the trail, ignoring the Bell point men who helplessly looked on, too shocked by this bald-faced play to fire a shot. The lead steers came to a sudden halt, horns lowered, bellowing out their quick alarm.

Bicknell kept inching his horse along, though Ramsey and Horne had stopped.

"Get back!" warned Ramsey in a loud, clear voice. "I'll kill you if you don't!"

"I'm goin' to cut this herd," said Bicknell in a dead flat tone. "Bell never owned three thousand head! And somebody killed two men—looks like you're caught with the joker in your mitt!"

Back on the drag the sound of fast-traveling horses came, increasing in volume as other Bell hands swept swiftly up the flank. Bicknell stopped his horse at last, not thirty feet from where Ramsey and Horne sat tight. Bicknell's right hand lay flat against his saddle flap; his left gripped the horn and bridle reins. His face, dark with anger held in check, was turned on the Bell men implacably. "Your play," he said in his habitual drawing tone.

Ramsey sat still. Horne pulled back a yard or two, a worried expression on his fallow face. He kept his elbows up and his hands in sight, and he said in a warning voice, "Watch out, Ford! They's a scad of riders up there at the point!"

Shouts rolled up from the drag of the stalled trail herd. And now, another group of riders broke out of the pall of dust. The moonlight shone garish on the mesquite and on gun-iron and on the high, cold rocks to right and left. Then Ramsey made his play.

He slid suddenly sidewise in his saddle. The movement lifted his right hip high; it thrust the handle of his gun up an inch or two, shortening the distance of his draw.

Bicknell, even with that handicap, beat him to the pull. As his palm slapped hard on the butt of his big black Colt, he hit home with his spurs. The sorrel lunged and Ramsey's snap shot missed by a foot. Bicknell held his gun

SIX-GUN SINNER

level but made no attempt to fire. Another streak of ragged fire came from Ramsey's gun and Bicknell's horse began to buck.

Yells came from the main Bell crew, now rushing up to Ramsey's aid, and close on those shouts came the shots like the hard dry rolling of a drum. Bicknell brought the sorrel down to earth and opened fire. He did not use the trigger, but thumbed the hammer back. Once—twice—three times he let the heavy weapon speak. Ford Ramsey took three slugs in his barrel chest, jerking in the saddle with the tremendous impact of each shot. He strained up in his stirrups, arms flung high—then wilted all at once. He fell, not swiftly, but slowly, ponderously, as a big tree falls. And when he struck the ground the dust rose up like a devil's halo and wafted very slowly down the wind.

Horne made a delayed grab for his own gun; and that fatal hesitation cost him his life. Bicknell's fourth shot crashed into him. He was a dead man even before he hit the dust. Both Bell mounts, riderless and wild, bucked off into the hemming brush.

Gunfire exploded from the point, and from farther back in the hills an echoing volley came; and then McClune and Shawn and the rest were drifting back to meet the Bell drag riders on the flank. Ross Bicknell spurred ahead into fast-gathering chaos. . . .

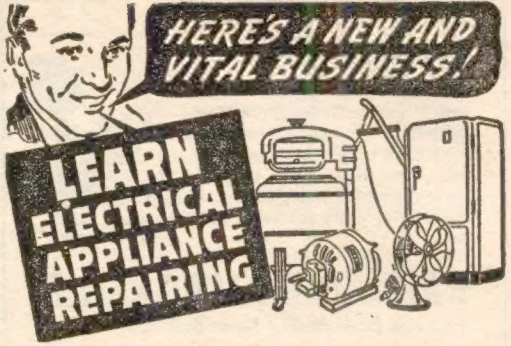
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When Bicknell rode into the T-Dot yard at noon, his clothing was ripped and torn by fast riding through thorny brush. But his gold-flecked eyes were bright and his back was straight, though deep lines of exhaustion scored his bone-thin face. Nancy and her father were waiting on the front gallery—Preacher Fred having arrived two hours earlier, dead-beat.

Bicknell walked up to the gallery on straight, stiff legs, and said, "Well, we gambled on a hunch and won. We ought to celebrate."

Nancy looked at him, a softness in her hazel eyes. Torvester forced a twisted smile. Nancy said, "Ross, you won. For us. And we can never pay you back."

"It was—a lot of excitement," he told her



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

gravely. "That's pay enough for a gamblin' man." He turned his serious glance on Preacher Fred. "I broke my word. But you couldn't handle a bunch like that without a gun. And now, if you don't mind, I'll take my time."

"Time?" Torvester stared at him. "Why, Bick, I was bankin' on you stayin' on to work for me!"

Bicknell dryly smiled. "Thought you always hated a liar or a man that packed a gun."

The ranch man looked uncomfortable. He gave Bicknell an embarrassed grin. "Things ain't the same—not quite," he said. "'Cause I turned out to be a liar, too!"

It was Bicknell's turn to stare. But he did not voice the question that was reflected in his eyes.

"Yuh see," Torvester went on candidly, "that marshal rode in a while ago, lookin' for you, like Nancy said he would. Well, Bick, he had me cornered and I lied to him—told him you'd gone on through last week, headin' for New Mexico!"

Bicknell pulled in a long deep breath. "Well, darn your red-rimmed eyes," he said. He put out his hand. "We're a pair of sinners, Fred—hide-deep and ornery. Shake!"

THE sun dropped down beneath a floor of snow-white clouds. Far out on Dogie Flats the distant rumble of the great trail herd came drifting through the glass-clear air. Night was running across the plains on silent, dusty feet.

Ross Bicknell stood with Nancy on the T-Dot gallery. The girl pressed close to him, and her sweet face showed strength and pride and the gentleness that made her what she was. He said, "You're lookin' as sad as a calf that's lost its ma."

She turned her head to hide the glimmer of close-held tears. "Ross, why must you go? Why can't you put it off a while?"

"I killed those tinhorn sports in self defense," he said, "when they tried to jump me in a poker game. That's why I got to go back and clear my name."

"You'll break Kip's heart," she said, "and mine."

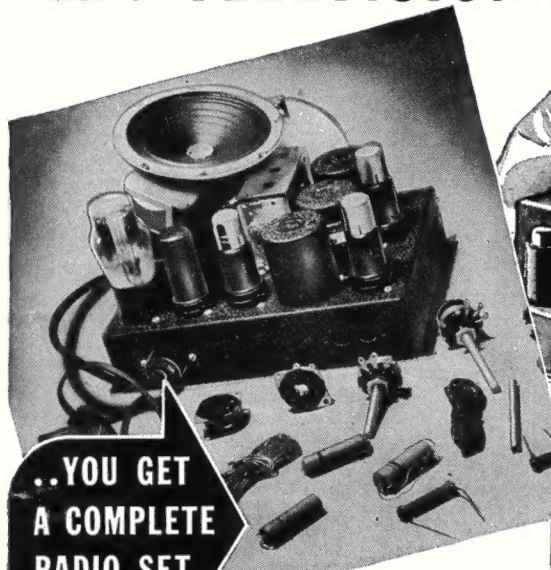
He pulled her closer now. "I'm comin' back," he gently said, "as sure as four aces top the deck."

She buried her dark head against his vest. "You're—only fooling me."

He slowly shook his head at that. A chuckle eased through his drawing voice. "Nancy, you'll never win at games of chance. That's a darned bad bet, and I'm goin' to call your bluff on it!"

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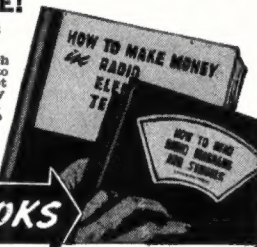
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